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JESUS THE BRIDEGROOM: A METAPHOR OF FIDELITY IN THE NEW COVENANT

A Thesis submitted for the degree of Masters of Theology

by

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Supervised at London School of Theology

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ABSTRACT

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Jesus the Bridegroom: A Metaphor of Fidelity in the New Covenant

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The New Testament sets up the metaphor of Jesus the Bridegroom and the Church his Bride, but the contemporary interpretations are varied and extreme. Single women proclaim Jesus is their Boyfriend while they wait for their real husbands. Authors advocate dressing up and going out on romantic dates with their divine Lover. But these affective portrayals of the Bridegroom are incongruent with Jesus who the New Testament writers witness to as Lord and Saviour. So who is Jesus the Bridegroom?

Looking at the metaphor in its biblical context, we find that the Prophets employed this imagery to promise a New Covenant in betrothal terms, and underscore the need for covenantal faithfulness. Networks of association corresponding with patriarchal marriage and covenant informed the prophetic metaphor. The New Testament writers adapted the prophetic usage of this metaphor to announce the New Covenant, the arrival of Jesus the ‘eschatological Bridegroom’. They further utilized this imagery to express the fidelity required of the Church, as the Bride of Christ. The romance of Song of Songs did not play a role in the New Testament authors’ presentation of Jesus the Bridegroom.

But the Early Church ascetics sought to sublimate the carnal or natural interpretation of the Song of Songs for a spiritual, allegorical interpretation. The Lover in the Song of Songs became understood as Jesus the Bridegroom and the Beloved, his Church. The Song became the means of mystically encountering Jesus the Bridegroom.

Throughout its reception history, the metaphor has drifted from its New Testament context and been reinterpreted through the lens of Song of Songs or contemporary bridegrooms. However, we advocate suspending the romantic framework of the Song of Songs, even briefly, in order to rediscover the New Testament metaphor of Jesus the Bridegroom. It is a matter of utter fidelity to Jesus Christ.

All abbreviations cited are found in the *SBL Handbook of Style for Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, and Early Christian Studies*, P. H. Alexander, J. F. Kutsko, J. D. Ernest, S. A. Decker-Lucke, and D. L. Petersen (eds.), Peabody: Hendrickson, 1999.

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INTRODUCTION

Contemporary perceptions of ‘Jesus the Bridegroom’

The New Testament sets up the Bride of Christ metaphor, but the contemporary portrayals of Jesus the Bridegroom are varied and extreme.¹ Catholic nuns continue to take vows to be chaste ‘brides of Christ’. Popular authors advocate considering Jesus as your fiancé, and going on romantic dates with him. Other authors develop certain verses from Song of Songs to convey to the reader that she or he has captivated the Lord’s heart, and ravished him with one glance of her or his eyes (Song 4:9).² Single women proclaim, ‘Jesus is my Boyfriend’—until they marry their real husbands, that is.³ But could any of these be the New Testament authors’ intention in utilizing this metaphor?

In her article in *Christianity Today*, Tennant raises concern with the extreme affective interpretations of Jesus the Bridegroom. She argues that the popular authors take the biblical metaphor of Jesus the Bridegroom ‘too far’ to the point of irreverence.⁴ In addition, she describes ways that it has ‘spilled over’ into Churches including a women’s tea, where the ladies dressed up in their wedding gowns, imagining they were brides of Christ. Others advocate dressing up to ‘run away and rendezvous with your heavenly bridegroom’.⁵

The Eldredges, authors of the New York Times Best Seller, *Captivating: Unveiling the Mystery of a Woman’s Soul*,⁶ entreat their readers, presumably women, to consider love scenes from popular movies in order to understand Jesus as their Lover. ‘Think of one of the most romantic scenes you can remember, scenes that make you sigh. Jack with Rose on the bow of the *Titanic*, his arms around her waist, their

¹ A. Tennant, ‘Dating Jesus: When the Lover of My Soul Language Goes Too Far’, *Christianity Today* 50/12 (2006), 56.

² Tennant, ‘Dating’, 56. For a list of popular books on the topic, see J. Scaramanga, ‘Jesus Is My Boyfriend’, Patheos website, (<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/leavingfundamentalism/2012/08/06/jesus-is-my-boyfriend/>; accessed August 2015). For a current scholarly perspective promoting an affective, allegorical reading of Song of Songs, see D.M. Carr’s article, ‘Ancient Sexuality and Divine Eros: Rereading the Bible through the Lens of the Song of Songs’, *USQR* 54/3-4, 2000, 1-18, citing 17.

³ W. Souders, ‘Jesus Is My Boyfriend’, Whitney Souders website, (<http://whitneysouders.com/2014/06/06/jesus-is-my-boyfriend/>; accessed August 2015).

⁴ Tennant, ‘Dating’, 56.

⁵ S. Ethridge and S. Arterburn, *Every Woman’s Battle*, Colorado Springs: WaterBrook, 2003 (2nd), 177.

⁶ J. and S. Eldredge, *Captivating*, Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010 (2nd).

first kiss...' They list several such examples, and appeal to the reader, 'Now, put yourself in the scene as the Beauty, and Jesus as the Lover.'⁷

In the next paragraph, they declare, 'It's okay. It's quite biblical. Jesus calls himself the Bridegroom.' They urge the reader to 'take off the religious drapery' and understand that '*Bridegroom* simply means fiancé. Lover.'⁸ The popularity of this perspective is confirmed by their multi-million book sales, and the proliferation of this teaching through their international ministry.

Tennant criticizes the Eldredges, denouncing their reliance on 'pop psychology, sentimentality, eisegesis, and clichés'.⁹ Campbell also disparages the 'ubiquitous references to fairy tales, rock ballads, and silver-screen romances' while the Eldredges' urge women to 'find the love they seek in the arms of their true bridegroom, Jesus Christ'.¹⁰

While we are not dismissing the extravagant love that Christ bestows upon us as his disciples, there seems to be a chasm between this Hollywood based depiction of Jesus as a bridegroom and the Jesus presented in the New Testament.

Another version of Jesus the Bridegroom is presented by Bickle at the International House of Prayer in Kansas City. He promotes a 'bridal paradigm',¹¹ and argues this worldview is necessary for the end-time Church.¹² Bickle teaches that the Church must be in her bridal identity, passionately in love with her Bridegroom Jesus, and calling out for his return, before the *parousia* will occur. Bickle's allegorical interpretation of Song of Songs is the foundation of this bridal paradigm and the lens through which he understands the kingdom of God. This teaching has influenced the prayer and charismatic movements internationally.¹³

⁷ *Ibid*, 115-116.

⁸ *Ibid*, 116.

⁹ A. Tennant, 'What (Not All) Women Want', *Christianity Today* 50/8 (2006), 60.

¹⁰ C.C. Campbell, 'God and the Second Sex', *First Things* 176 (2007), 51-56, citing 52.

¹¹ M. Bickle, *The Song of Songs*, Kansas City: Forerunner, 2012, 11, *passim*; M. Bickle and D. Hiebert, *The Seven Longings of the Human Heart*, Kansas City: Forerunner, 2006, 11-23.

¹² M. Bickle, *The Book of Revelation Study Guide*, Kansas City: Forerunner, 2010 (2nd).

¹³ His teachings have been translated into many languages and taught globally, IHOP and Mike Bickle Teaching Library websites, (<http://www.ihopkc.org>; <http://mikebickle.org>; accessed November 2014). However, Bickle and the ministry at IHOP have been called into question for their teachings and practices. There are a myriad of websites urging caution regarding Bickle and IHOP. For example, S.M. Houdmann, 'What Is the International House of Prayer (IHOP)?', Got Questions Ministries website (<http://www.gotquestions.org/International-House-of-Prayer-IHOP.html>; accessed January 2016) and J. Park, 'The Dangers of the International House of Prayer (IHOP)', Christian Apologetics and Research Ministry website (<https://carm.org/ihop>; accessed January 2016).

While these authors and teachers proclaim their various presentations of Jesus as Bridegroom are ‘biblical’, we fail to see a mirror of this type of description in the New Testament. The questions persist, ‘Who is Jesus the Bridegroom, and what did the biblical authors intend by their employment of this metaphor?’

Recent scholarship

Recent scholarship has seen a resurgence of discussion on the topic of Jesus the Bridegroom and the Church his Bride. This New Testament metaphor is deeply rooted in the Old Testament, and is generally referred to as the marriage metaphor. While some of the debate within scholarship focuses on a specific book or passage in the scripture, there is considerable interest in the metaphor in general.

Haste argues for the significance of Jesus the Bridegroom as a bearer of the New Covenant. He asserts that the New Testament writers identified Jesus the Bridegroom as the fulfilment of the promised New Covenant found in the Prophets.¹⁴ After a concise survey of the metaphor in the Old and New Testaments, he emphasizes that the marriage metaphor ascribes new importance to human marriage.¹⁵ He describes the need for ongoing faithfulness within the New Covenant and the unfathomable grace that God extends towards us in Christ.¹⁶ He suggests further study of the function the marriage metaphor in relation to the New Covenant as ‘far too little’ has been written.¹⁷

Ortland conducts a broad study of the marriage metaphor across both Testaments.¹⁸ However, he does this through the lens of ‘whoredom’, the metaphor depicting the unfaithfulness of the people of God. Ortland traces the theme of relational unfaithfulness between Yahweh and his people from Genesis to Revelation. He argues that from Creation, God has wanted a people who are completely devoted to him, and that human marriage is designed to display the divine-human relationship, ‘to

¹⁴ M. Haste, ‘Your Maker Is Your Husband: The Divine Marriage Metaphor and the New Covenant’, *Puritan Reformed Journal* 5/1 (2013), 15-28, citing 27.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 23f, 27.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁸ R.C. Ortland, Jr., *Whoredom*, Leicester: Apollos, 1996.

be emblematic of Christ and the Church in covenant...'¹⁹ He underscores the need for believers in Christ to live in covenantal faithfulness to him.²⁰

Tait examines the marriage metaphor intertestamentally to argue that Mark uses this imagery to ascribe deity to Christ.²¹ While it may appear confusing because Jesus is the Messiah, and the Bridegroom, Tait is careful to show that the messianic expectation of the first century did not incorporate the expectation of a bridegroom persona.²² In the Old Testament, the Bridegroom/Husband was always Yahweh, not a messianic figure. Instead he asserts that Jesus is the 'eschatological Bridegroom' referred to in the Prophets, as the inaugurator of the New Covenant.²³ He argues that Jesus is the Messiah because he is the eschatological Bridegroom, not a bridegroom because he is the Messiah.²⁴

Long focuses his attention on the wedding parables in the synoptic gospels.²⁵ He contends that the sources of these parables are the Old Testament prophetic promises of an eschatological abundance, a return from the wilderness, and the restored marriage of Israel.²⁶ He asserts that Jesus relied on these themes when he constructed the parables found in Matthew 9, 22, and 25. His purpose is to defend the plausibility of these parables originating with Jesus rather than being constructs of the Early Church.²⁷

McWhirter argues that the author of John intentionally depicted Jesus as a messianic Bridegroom,²⁸ finding echoes of Songs of Songs and other Old Testament nuptial imagery in the Fourth Gospel. She reads this book as literature, to avoid 'patriarchal conventions that demean women'.²⁹ Her argument depends on the assumption that the Johannine community interpreted Song of Songs allegorically and understood Jesus to be the Lover, which she admits cannot be proven.³⁰ A particular weakness is her reliance on the assumption that a messianic reading of Psalm 45

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 172.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 140-3, 152, 175f.

²¹ M. Tait, *Jesus, the Divine Bridegroom in Mark 2:18-22*, Rome: Gregorian & Biblical, 2010.

²² *Ibid.*, 25, 95.

²³ *Ibid.*, 19.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 261.

²⁵ P.J. Long, *Jesus the Bridegroom*, Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2013.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 8f.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 7, 243, *passim*.

²⁸ J. McWhirter, *The Bridegroom Messiah and the People of God*, Cambridge: CUP, 2006.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 140.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 131.

influenced the author.³¹ However, the Psalm is not quoted in the Gospel, and scholarship is divided as to when the bridegroom imagery was integrated into the attributes of the Messiah.³²

Smolarz focuses his attention on the Book of Revelation.³³ He argues that the Apocalypse is ‘concerned with Jerusalem’s fall, even from a pre-70 CE perspective’,³⁴ and the marriage metaphor is ‘central to the book’.³⁵ He renders the female imagery as a metaphoric substitution for covenant. Therefore, in his opinion, the purpose of the Apocalypse is to express the judgment of God and the consummation of the New Covenant marriage as occurring in 70 CE.³⁶ He admits he goes against the tide of scholarship, which sees the Marriage Supper of the Lamb as a future event.³⁷ In doing so he minimizes the importance of the already/not yet quality of the marriage metaphor and Jesus the Bridegroom.³⁸ Though he perceives Revelation as a ‘covenantal book’, he overlooks the point of the metaphor serving as an ongoing symbol of covenantal faithfulness for the Church for all time.³⁹

Within traditional scholarship on Jesus the Bridegroom and the marriage metaphor in general, the focus has been more on exegesis than on how the metaphor functions. However, van der Watt examined the family metaphors in John utilizing cognitive metaphor theories.⁴⁰ He notes that nuptial imagery is prominent in Chapters 2-4 of the Fourth Gospel, but disappointingly, he did not conduct an in-depth study of Jesus the Bridegroom.⁴¹ The Bridegroom metaphor is submerged rather than explicit. In addition, Dawes addresses the body metaphor in Ephesians, which interfaces with the marriage imagery in Chapter 5, but chooses to relegate the marital imagery to an

³¹ S. Winter, ‘Review of J. McWhirter, *The Bridegroom Messiah and the People of God*’, *JSNT* 30/5 (2008), 68-69, citing 69.

³² J. Lieu, ‘Review of J. McWhirter, *The Bridegroom Messiah and the People of God*’, *Ecclesiology* 5 (2009), 255-257, citing 256.

³³ S.R. Smolarz, *Covenant and the Metaphor of Divine Marriage in Biblical Thought*, Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2011.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 244.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 228.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 244, 253.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 193.

³⁸ G.R. Beasley-Murray emphasizes this feature of the marriage metaphor, *The Book of Revelation*, London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1974, 274. Cf. R.A. Batey, *New Testament Nuptial Imagery*, Leiden: Brill, 1971, 67; ‘Paul’s Bridal Image: A Symbol of Realistic Eschatology’, *Interpretation* 17, 1963, 176-82. Batey remains an influential theologian in the study of nuptial imagery.

³⁹ He follows D. Chilton’s theory, *Days of Vengeance*, Ft. Worth: Dominion, 1990.

⁴⁰ J.G. van der Watt, *Family of the King*, Leiden: Brill, 2000.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 393.

analogy, rather than a metaphor.⁴² An exception is Stienstra's work on tracing the marriage metaphor throughout the Hebrew Prophets.⁴³ She takes a cognitive approach, following Lakoff and Johnson,⁴⁴ arguing that the marriage metaphor and its association with covenantal fidelity became an integral part of Israel's self-understanding. It is 'a metaphor they lived by'.⁴⁵ Her work also deals with translation issues relating to the metaphor.⁴⁶

Feminist scholars have sharply criticized the explicit language employed in the Prophets, calling it 'pornoprophetic'.⁴⁷ Though it is used rhetorically to shock the 'male literati',⁴⁸ it eerily echoes similar abusive cycles of domestic violence. Feminists decry this imagery and the patriarchal structures the marriage metaphor reinforces. Having such violent language against women in scriptures that are considered authoritative, albeit in metaphoric discourse, is disturbing; it could enable some men to justify or condone such behaviour towards women in the present.⁴⁹ There have been a variety of responses within feminist scholarship: some have sought to eliminate the concept of a 'marriage metaphor' in the sexual and marital imagery found in the Prophets,⁵⁰ while others still find a glimpse of redemption in the imagery.⁵¹ Others urge caution when applying this same metaphor to Christ and the Church, being careful to differentiate that which is appropriate.⁵² In addition, feminists embrace cognitive theories of metaphor, which emphasize the power of metaphor to shape our thoughts

⁴² G.W. Dawes, *The Body in Question*, Leiden: Brill, 1998.

⁴³ N. Stienstra, *YHWH is the Husband of His People*, Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1993.

⁴⁴ G. Lakoff and M. Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, Chicago: UCP, 1980. Stienstra also incorporates Kitty and Lehrer's models, *YHWH*, 29-34. See 21-40, for her discussion of modern metaphor theory and the marriage metaphor; 41-69 for theological metaphor arguments.

⁴⁵ Stienstra, *YHWH*, 187.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 191-232.

⁴⁷ A. Brenner, 'Pornoprophetics Revisited: Some Additional Reflections', *JSOT* 70 (1996), 63-86. She argues the metaphor is religious propaganda.

⁴⁸ E. Ben Zvi, 'Observations on the Marital Metaphor of YHWH and Israel in Its Ancient Israelite Context: General Considerations and Particular Images in Hosea 1.2', *JSOT* 28/3 (2004), 363-384, citing 365. For further discussion of the rhetorical impact of this metaphor, see R.J. Weems, *Battered Love*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995, 12-67.

⁴⁹ Weems, *Battered*, 110.

⁵⁰ S. Moughtin-Mumby, *Sexual and Marital Metaphors in Hosea, Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel*, Oxford: OUP, 2008, 275. She is not interested in the 'authorial meaning', but seeks to encourage a creative interpretation of the text, 47f. Cf. A. Fehribach, *The Women in the Life of the Bridegroom*, Collegeville: Liturgical, 1998. She advocates reading the text in ways that the author never intended.

⁵¹ Weems, *Battered*, 81. She argues that this metaphor, despite the horror of the language, uniquely captures the allegiance Israel owes Yahweh. She also sees the unfathomable grace that God extends to us despite how far we stray from him, 113-115.

⁵² K.D. Salkenfeld, *Just Wives?*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003, 106. She also addresses the importance of not suppressing the abusive language, but to engage with it and confront it.

and worldviews. It is this metaphoric and rhetorical influence on people's worldview that raises the feminists' battle cry against the prophetic language.

Moughtin-Mumby argues that the gap between traditional and feminist interpretations of the metaphor relates to each side's view of metaphoric theory: traditional scholars adhere to a substitutionary or comparison understanding of metaphor while feminists incorporate a modern cognitive approach.⁵³ Although this may be an oversimplification of the issues, it nevertheless raises the question of how does one interpret the marriage metaphor. Therefore, we will explore some ideas of how metaphor works. This becomes even more relevant as we attempt to understand the divide between the biblical presentation of Jesus the Bridegroom and what we find in the contemporary Church.

How Metaphor Works

Since Aristotle, the function of metaphor has been understood as an ornamental substitution for literal speech.⁵⁴ With this view, one can always discover the hidden or intended meaning, as long as the context is understood. Comparison theory is similar in that some metaphors seem to be drawing a comparison between two subjects. For example, one might consider how our relationship with God is similar or dissimilar to that of marriage. However, modern theorists have argued that metaphor is more than a linguistic tool; it is a cognitive function. Metaphor creates unique meaning through the interaction of the networks of associations at work within the metaphor.⁵⁵

Richards instigated the development of contemporary metaphoric theory.⁵⁶ He put forth the premise that the meaning generated by a metaphoric utterance is unique. He identifies the *tenor* of a metaphor as the word or idea that is understood literally, while the *vehicle* is the figurative word or utterance that imparts meaning to the *tenor*. The network of associations with the vehicle animates the tenor, and causes one to think of the tenor through the lens of the vehicle. But the reverse also occurs; the tenor and the vehicle animate one another through the networks of associations available.

⁵³ Moughtin-Mumby, *Sexual*, 3. She elaborates on this divide, 1-48.

⁵⁴ Cited in J.M. Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1985, 8. She examines Aristotle's work and other classical origins of substitution theory, 3-14, 24-26.

⁵⁵ G. Lakoff asserts that these networks of association are actually conceptual domains, and that the 'locus' of metaphor is cognitive not linguistic, 'The Contemporary Theory Of Metaphor', in A. Ortony (ed.), *Metaphor and Thought*, Cambridge: CUP, 1993, 202-251, citing 203.

⁵⁶ I.A. Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, Oxford: OUP, 1936.

Black builds on Richards' theory, putting forth his 'interactive theory'.⁵⁷ He sees metaphor as two subjects, generally in the form of A is B. A is the focus and B is the model which imparts new understanding to A. It is the underlying models (networks of association) with both subjects that interact and generate new meaning. The frame of a sentence determines whether a word is being used literally or metaphorically.

Soskice, however, rightly criticizes Black for assigning two subjects to a metaphor as not all metaphors follow the format of A is B. She cites examples of adjectival metaphors such as 'metaphysical streets'⁵⁸ and literary passages where the subject is submerged, but the descriptive language serves as the vehicle to animate the unexpressed subject. It is the whole utterance, not just a secondary subject, which serves as the vehicle. This is relevant in our studies of Jesus the Bridegroom, for there is not an explicit metaphor stating, 'Jesus is the Bridegroom.'

Soskice argues that metaphor is 'speaking about one thing or state of affairs in terms which are suggestive of another'; it is "two ideas for one", a unity of subject matter and a plurality of associate networks'.⁵⁹ While she disagrees that there are two subjects, she affirms that there are at least two associative networks involved in a metaphor. Because these networks of associations change from audience to audience, the meaning and interpretation varies. Therefore, Weems argues that 'metaphors require our constant vigilance' as they can be easily reinterpreted or misunderstood.⁶⁰

While metaphor has the power to create meaning, metaphor is not 'all we know'. On the one hand, we agree that God is so 'other' that no language is adequate to describe him, hence, the spectrum of biblical metaphors. But the biblical metaphors also point to a reality that exists. When we speak of God, metaphor is necessary because our language is so limited. 'The proliferation of imagery used by Prophets and Psalmists to denote the God of Israel is evidence, surely ... [of] the realization that no image could be adequate to 'I AM WHO I AM.'⁶¹

McFague developed a metaphorical theology that advocates the changing of metaphors that are patriarchal or individualist.⁶² She advises that we consider God as

⁵⁷ M. Black, 'More About Metaphor', in A. Ortony (ed.), *Metaphor and Thought*, Cambridge: CUP, 1993, 19-41.

⁵⁸ Soskice, *Metaphor*, 50.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁶⁰ Weems, *Battered*, 116.

⁶¹ Soskice, *Metaphor*, 77.

⁶² S. McFague, *Speaking in Parables*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975; *Metaphorical Theology*, London: SCM, 1982; *Models of God*, London: SCM, 1987.

lover, mother, or friend, instead of God as husband, father, or king. But her interpretation of these ‘new’ metaphors has nothing to do with the traditional understanding of God.⁶³ Stienstra strongly criticizes her, stating

As McFague is convinced that metaphor is a way of structuring a concept that cannot be grasped otherwise, she fully realizes that changing a metaphor must automatically involve changing the concept it structures. Now it may, of course, be the goal of a theologian to change the religion he is dealing with, rather than interpret, explain, unfold it... But if we regard the Bible as a book that is worth interpreting and translating as such, we must decide to part company with such theologians, and proceed to analyse (and translate) our text(s) without further reference to their proposals.⁶⁴

We agree with Stienstra that our job is to try to unfold the biblical authors’ intentions with the Jesus the Bridegroom metaphor. While we appreciate and acknowledge the concerns raised regarding the language within the marriage metaphor and the patriarchal structures it inherently reinforces, we affirm that this metaphor uniquely communicates the intimacy offered, the grace bestowed, and the allegiance required in our relationship with God.

Our Objective

The metaphor of Jesus the Bridegroom depicts a truth about our relationship with God, but it remains a *metaphor* that points to a reality. In our study we will focus on the use of this metaphor in the Old and New Testaments and attempt to determine the authors’ intentions when employing this metaphor. We will do this through examining networks of associations (models) of the biblical metaphor, considering this context through the survey of the ‘marriage metaphor’ intertestamentally. Then we will investigate the reception history of the metaphor of Jesus the Bridegroom and the development of the corresponding metaphor of the Church his Bride. From this analysis, we will draw conclusions on the contemporary representations of Jesus the Bridegroom and the Church his Bride.

⁶³ McFague, *Models*, 128. She sees God as lover and the world as his body, to move away from any individualist applications.

⁶⁴ Stienstra, *YHWH*, 66.

OLD TESTAMENT SURVEY

Introduction

The metaphor of Jesus the Bridegroom is deeply rooted in the Old Testament. Whispers of this metaphor appear in the Pentateuch, where marital language is used in the Covenant between Yahweh and Israel. In the Prophets, the metaphor takes on new dimensions when God instructs Hosea to marry Gomer to demonstrate Israel's unfaithfulness to the Covenant with Yahweh. Betrothal imagery is specifically used to indicate the restoration of Yahweh's relationship with his people; the Bridegroom metaphor speaks of the promised New Covenant. The later prophets also employ this imagery. In order to understand the way in which the authors used the metaphor we need first to look at the networks of association with this metaphor, namely, marriage, covenant, and ANE *hieros gamos*. Then we will survey the relevant imagery in the Old Testament. From this survey, we will propose the models involved in the first century understanding of Jesus the Bridegroom.

Marriage In Hebrew culture, family is of utmost importance, and marriage is the foundation of the family.⁶⁵ The patriarchal, clan-based society of Israel required male heirs to perpetuate the family name, or more specifically, the man's name. 'Fathers lived on in their children.'⁶⁶ Therefore, fecundity in marriage was crucial. Though monogamy was the preferred practice, a woman's barrenness could result in divorce or the taking on of additional wives or concubines.⁶⁷ Barrenness was a great shame. 'A woman derived her honour and status as a wife and mother.'⁶⁸ Absolute fidelity on the part of the wife was essential to ensure paternity.

⁶⁵ R.K. Bower and G.L. Knapp, 'Marriage; Marry' in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, G.W. Bromiley (ed.), Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986, 3:261-266, citing 262.

⁶⁶ D.I. Block, 'Marriage and Family in Ancient Israel', in K.M. Campbell (ed.), *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World*, Downers Grove: IVP, 2003, 33-102, citing 72.

⁶⁷ L.G. Perdue et al, *Families in Ancient Israel*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997, 185f. R. Albertz and R. Schmitt stress that royal polygamy was an exception, *Family and Household Religion in Ancient Israel and the Levant*, Winona Lake: Eerdmans, 2012, 396.

⁶⁸ S.J. Dille, 'Women and Female Imagery', in M.J. Boda and J.G. McConville (eds.), *Dictionary of the Old Testament Prophets*, Nottingham: IVP, 2012, 847-860, citing 851.

A woman was completely devoted to her husband; he had sole rights to her sexuality.⁶⁹ However, a man was not required to reciprocate this level of fidelity in the marriage. Prostitution was legal, and polygamy permitted.⁷⁰ Only the violation of another man's wife was seen as adultery.

A woman was under the protection of her father or another family member until she was married; then she was transferred to the family of her husband. A husband was required to provide food, clothes, and conjugal rights to his wife (Ex. 21:10).⁷¹ Within the patriarchal society, it was necessary for a woman to have a male protector; otherwise, she was vulnerable. Throughout the Old Testament we find references to care for the widow and the orphan, as they had no one to defend them.⁷²

There is little specific information about wedding customs; the Law does not stipulate a specific protocol. However, we can glean from the available narratives and observe the patterns presented.⁷³

In general, the Israelite parents arranged marriages for their children.⁷⁴ When the appropriate spouse was chosen, a betrothal agreement would be arranged. This agreement was legally binding; a woman was 'set apart' for her husband.⁷⁵ From that time she was considered his wife, although the marriage would not be consummated until the wedding. A *mohar*, bride price, would be agreed upon, and the woman's dowry.⁷⁶ Gifts were exchanged. Vows were undertaken, perhaps with the formulation, 'She is my wife and I am her husband'.⁷⁷ The spreading of the hem of the man's garment over the woman may have also been a rite of passage observed.⁷⁸

⁶⁹ Perdue, *Families*, 184.

⁷⁰ D.M. Carr, 'Gender and the Shaping of Desire in the Song of Songs and Its Interpretation', *JBL* 119/2 (2000), 233-248, citing 237.

⁷¹ R. Apple, 'Marriage – The Concept', in F. Skolnik and M. Berenbaum (eds.), *Encyclopedia Judaica*, London: Thompson Gale, 2007 (2nd), 13:563f, citing 563f.

⁷² T.C. Parker, 'Marriage and Divorce' in M.J. Boda and J.G. McConville (eds.), *Dictionary of the Old Testament Prophets*, Nottingham: IVP, 2012, 533-537, citing 534. E.g. Ex. 22:22; Deut. 10:18; Ps. 68:5; Jer. 22:3; cf. Block, 'Marriage', 71.

⁷³ *Ibid.* Parker urges caution in deriving information from the Prophets because of the difficulty in distinguishing metaphorical use from actual practice.

⁷⁴ V.P. Hamilton, 'Marriage (OT and ANE)', in D.N. Freedman (ed.), *ABD*, New York, Doubleday, 1992, 4:559-569, citing 562f.

⁷⁵ Apple, 'Marriage', 564.

⁷⁶ Albertz and Schmitt, *Family*, 395.

⁷⁷ P.A. Kruger, 'Rites of Passage Relating to Marriage and Divorce in the Hebrew Bible', *JNSL* 21/2 (1995), 69-81, citing 73.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 77.

Weddings were celebrated with a weeklong feast.⁷⁹ When the bride finally entered her husband's home, she became a part of his family. This was the final right of passage for the marriage.⁸⁰

Divorce was allowed in the Mosaic Law; a woman would be 'sent out' from her husband's home.⁸¹ Her ex-husband provided her with a certificate of divorce; without it, she would not be free to remarry.⁸² The certificate included the statement, 'She is not my wife.'⁸³ However, a man did not need a certificate because he was allowed to have more than one wife.

If the woman committed adultery, she and the male offender could be punished by death (Lev. 20:10). However, it is unknown if this extreme punishment was regularly enforced.⁸⁴ Other ANE societies prescribed various punishments such as stripping and the sending away naked an adulterous wife from her husband's home. However, this punishment cannot be assumed as the common practice in Israel, in light of the avoidance of nakedness in general within the Israelite culture.⁸⁵

Marriage in the Old Testament was clearly patriarchal, but a wife of noble character was 'far more precious than jewels' (Prov. 31:10). The very nature of this asymmetrical relationship allowed the marriage metaphor to be apprehended by the Jewish audience. If there had been a more of an egalitarian model of marriage, the metaphor would not have served the purposes of expressing the absolute loyalty and fidelity that God required of his people. It also gives additional insight into God's character as the jealous, yet loving, provider and protector of his people.

Covenant A covenant is a formal treaty or commitment between two parties, 'in which one or both make promises under oath to perform or refrain from certain actions stipulated in advance'.⁸⁶ In our culture, it is difficult to imagine what a covenant involves, because the term has fallen into disuse, except in technical legal contracts.

⁷⁹ Gen. 29:27; Judg. 14:12; Tob. 11:19; R. Posner, 'Marriage Ceremony' in F. Skolnik and M. Berenbaum (eds.), *Encyclopedia Judaica*, London: Thompson Gale, 2007 (2nd), 13:565-568, citing 565.

⁸⁰ Kruger, 'Rites', 74.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁸² D.I. Brewer, 'Three Weddings and a Divorce: God's Covenant With Israel, Judah and the Church', *TynBul* 47/1 (1996), 1-25, citing 11.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁸⁴ Perdue, *Families*, 184.

⁸⁵ Stienstra, *YHWH*, 71, 85-86, 106.

⁸⁶ G.E. Mendenhall and G.A. Herion, 'Covenant', in D.N. Freedman (ed.), *ABD*, New York, Doubleday, 1992, 1:1179-1202, citing 1:1179.

We have few relationships that are based on ‘promises honourably made and reliable kept’.⁸⁷ Mendenhall and Herion argue that the ‘fragile institution of marriage remains as the most noteworthy vestige’ of the covenantal relationship today.⁸⁸

The Old Testament explains Yahweh’s relationship with Israel as a covenant. God sovereignly chose Abraham to become a ‘great nation’, the only condition of compliance being the circumcision of the males.⁸⁹ This Covenant can also be considered a ‘divine charter’ as it is a one-sided and unconditional promise from God.⁹⁰ Similarly, the Covenant with David, stated as a promise in 2 Sam 7:7-17, and later interpreted as a Covenant in Psalm 89:36, is an example of a divine charter.

However when we come to the Sinai Covenant we see a different design. Scholars have found similarities between this Covenant and the ANE suzerain treaties of the Late Bronze Age.⁹¹ These covenants demand an exclusive allegiance. The king could enforce the death penalty upon the vassal for violating any of the stipulations of the covenant. For example, if the vassal makes a treaty with another ruler or nation, or fails to obey the conditions outlined, it would be considered a breach of the covenant. Breaking the covenant was considered an act of treason. The blessings of keeping the covenant and the curses for breaking it were explained in detail in the treaty. The blessings may include military protection and provision of goods, while the curses detailed the severe punishment, often destruction or death. We find similar types of lists in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28.⁹² The Sinai Covenant follows a format with which the original recipients would have been familiar.

Weinfeld notes the ‘latent form’ of the ‘marital love’ or the marriage between God and Israel in the Pentateuch, though it is ‘not mentioned explicitly’.⁹³ Yahweh declares his name is ‘Jealous’ (Ex. 20:25; Deut. 5:9; cf. Ex. 34:14; Josh. 24:19). The root of the word ‘jealous’ is used in Numbers 5:14 to express a husband’s jealousy for

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ Gen 12:1-7, 15, 17, 22.

⁹⁰ Mendenhall and Herion, ‘Covenant’, 1:1188.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 1:1180-1182.

⁹² See A.J. Avery-Peck, ‘Covenant’, in J. Neusner, A.J. Avery-Peck, and W.S. Green (eds.), *The Encyclopedia of Judaism*, Leiden: Brill, 2000, 136-151, citing 137-139, for a comparison of the Mosaic covenant with the Hittite format.

⁹³ M. Weinfeld, ‘Covenant’, in F. Skolnik and M. Berenbaum (eds.), *Encyclopedia Judaica*, London: Thompson Gale, 2007 (2nd), 5:252f.

his wife.⁹⁴ With this association, there is an implicit expectation of utter faithfulness on the part of God's people, the same as a husband would require from his wife.

Furthermore, we find the verb *zanah* 'aharei, 'to whore after' used to describe Israel's disloyalty, both in the worship of other gods, and in looking to other nations for support instead of relying completely on Yahweh's provision and protection.⁹⁵

But what is sometimes overlooked is 'the formula expressing the covenantal relationship between God and Israel, "you will be my people and I will be your God" (e.g. Lev. 26:12; Deut. 29:12).'⁹⁶ This statement in the Sinai Covenant 'is a legal formula taken from the sphere of marriage'.⁹⁷

The command to 'Love the Lord your God...' (Deut. 6:5) is not exclusively an affective matter. Moran underscores that the word love is also read in other covenantal treaties between a vassal and a sovereign, as well as between 'friends' of kings.⁹⁸ It relates to obedience.

Furthermore, Goldingay notes the association of Covenant with steadfast love, *hesed*, found throughout the Old Testament.⁹⁹ God's action in Covenant is an extension of his steadfast love; our covenantal relationships should imitate this reality of Yahweh's unfailing, loyal love.

ANE hieros gamos In the religious myths of the ANE, there are stories of marriages or sexual relationships between the deities. The Ugarit and Sumerian texts provide a variety of stories of the gods' mythical sexual relations that produce fertility in the land.¹⁰⁰ Ancient Ugarit texts provide evidence of an annual celebration of the restored marriage of Baal and Anat; the myth was re-enacted by the king at the temple with a prostitute to ensure the fertility of the land.¹⁰¹ In addition, it may have been compulsory for a woman to serve once in her lifetime in the temple as a prostitute in honour of the

⁹⁴ Ortland, *Whoredom*, 29-31.

⁹⁵ Weinfeld, 'Covenant', 5:252f.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ W.L. Moran, 'The Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy', *CBQ* 25, (1963), 77-87, citing 79.

⁹⁹ J. Goldingay, 'Covenant, OT and NT', in K.D. Sakenfeld (ed.), *New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Nashville: Abingdon, 2006, 1:767-778, citing 1:778.

¹⁰⁰ H.W. Wolff, *Hosea*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974, 14.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*; cf. B.E. Kelle, *Hosea 2*, Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005, 133-137. He also cites similar myths of Dumuzi and Inanna.

goddess of love.¹⁰² Wolff posits that both ritual defloration and cultic prostitution were a mainstay in Baal worship.¹⁰³

Recent scholarship has raised the claim that cultic prostitution in Baal worship in Israel was not prevalent.¹⁰⁴ Kelle argues that the lack of evidence, specifically in reference to cultic prostitution, renders the assumption implausible.¹⁰⁵ However, he asserts that 'sexual excess' may have taken place at times of festivals, particularly the New Year festival.¹⁰⁶ Bird posits that the role of women in the cultic worship was not necessarily that of prostitutes; rather, these 'consecrated women' performed other priestly duties.¹⁰⁷

It is possible that some forms of cultic prostitution were present in Israel, but it is unlikely they were connected with Yahwism except syncretistically. It is not necessarily a precursor for the prophetic marriage metaphor. Apostasy and Baal worship, even without cultic prostitution, are more than enough to be labelled metaphorically as whoredom or spiritual adultery in Yahweh's Wife.¹⁰⁸

Hosea

Hosea was a prophet to the Northern Kingdom, a contemporary of Amos. Hosea's ministry spanned the last three decades of the rule of Jeraboham II, from the time of great prosperity to the Babylonian invasion and deportation.¹⁰⁹

The book has two main sections. Chapters 1-3 focus on the prophet's marriage, while the remaining chapters, 4-14, are a kaleidoscope of metaphorical indictments against Israel's breaking of the Covenant.¹¹⁰

¹⁰² Herodotus I, c.5 BCE: 'The foulest Babylonian custom is that which compels every woman of the land once in her life to sit in the temple of Aphrodite and have intercourse with some stranger,' cited in Wolff, *Hosea*, 86-87.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 14, 85-88.

¹⁰⁴ Dille, 'Women', 852.

¹⁰⁵ Kelle, *Hosea*, 123-139. He argues that the textual evidence from the Baal myths is too limited to draw conclusions that 'sexual activity was key' to Baal worship, 137.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 137.

¹⁰⁷ P. Bird, "'To Play the Harlot': An Inquiry into an Old Testament Metaphor", in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*, P.L. Day (ed.), Minneapolis: Fortress, 1986, 75-94, citing 76.

¹⁰⁸ G.D. Cohen, 'The Song of Songs and the Jewish Religious Mentality', in *The Samuel Friedland Lectures 1960-1966*, New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1966, 1-21, citing 5. He emphasizes that the implausibility that 'fanatical monotheists, who would have no truck with such rituals or with terms associated with them, could have made peace with such a figure of speech and then proceed to make it central in their thought'.

¹⁰⁹ Kelle, *Hosea*, 4-8; cf. J.L. Mays, *Hosea*, London: SCM, 1969, 3-5.

¹¹⁰ The marriage metaphor is one of the many used in the 'galaxy' of images in Hosea, E.O. Nwaoru, *Imagery in the Prophecy of Hosea*, Munich: Manfred Gorg, 1999, 14.

In Chapter 1, Yahweh commands the prophet to take a ‘wife of harlotry and have children of harlotry’.¹¹¹ Translators have used a variety of terms to translate this adjective for Hosea’s wife, such as prostitute, promiscuous woman, and immoral woman. However, the word for prostitute is *znh*, and the word describing Gomer, Hosea’s wife, is *zenunim*, which more usually points to a ‘characteristic behavior’.¹¹²

The point of Hosea’s taking Gomer as a wife is not to demonstrate the possibility of Israel’s sexual involvement in Baal cultic activity, but to instruct Israel that the worship of any other gods is spiritual adultery.

It is worth stressing that the matter is not of historical cultic prostitution, but of an ideological and discursive association that imagines (and conveys the message that) worship of gods other than YHWH is tantamount to a wife’s adultery or prostitution.¹¹³

The central point of Hosea and Gomer’s marriage is to communicate Israel’s unfaithfulness, and Yahweh’s steadfast love and faithfulness to Israel.

Gomer bore three children, though it is unclear whether Hosea fathered them or not. They were given prophetic names that declare judgment on Israel. The first, Jezreel, which means, ‘God sows’, sounds positive, but it is indicative of the sins that were committed there, and that it will be a place of judgment for Israel. Lo-Ruhamah means ‘no mercy’: the LORD will not show mercy to his people any longer. The third is Lo-Ammi, meaning ‘not my people’, thus declaring that Israel is no longer his people. Nevertheless, Hosea prophesies the reversal of all three accusations, along with the reuniting of Judah and Israel (1:10f).

In Chapter 2, we find a divine *rif*, a covenantal lawsuit. The first section pronounces judgment and punishment for Israel’s disobedience; the second announces salvation and eschatological hope for Yahweh’s unfaithful Wife. Verse 2 brings an accusation, but interestingly, as a command to the children: ‘Make an accusation against your mother. Make the accusation that she is not my wife and I am not her

¹¹¹ M.J.W. Leith argues that the term ‘wife of harlotry belongs to the semantic field of covenantal curses’, ‘Verse and Reverse: the Transformation of the Woman, Israel, in Hosea 1-3’, in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*, P.L. Day (ed.), Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989, 95-108, citing 104.

¹¹² *Zenunim*, meaning fornication, is a plural abstract intensive, which indicates an abstract idea, BDB 276A. Therefore, it can be understood as a character trait, A.A. MacIntosh, *Hosea*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997, 8. MacIntosh argues Hosea discovered her character after the fact. Ben Zvi argues Hosea married her with the knowledge of her character, in response to the divine command. He emphasizes that it refers to a promiscuous characteristic as Gomer is not called a cultic prostitute, *qdšdt*, in the text, ‘Observations’, 379n31. Fensham, following Wolff, argues she participated in the Baal rituals, ‘The Marriage Metaphor in Hosea for the Covenant Relationship Between the Lord and His People (Hos. 1:2-9)’, *JNSL* 12 (1984), 71-78, citing 72.

¹¹³ Ben Zvi, ‘Observations’, 369n15.

husband.’ Whether this is a threat or an actual statement of divorce is not clear.¹¹⁴

Stuart argues that it ‘is more a trial for adultery than divorce...The purpose of the legal action is both corrective and restorative’.¹¹⁵

The punishments that are threatened are in line with the covenantal curses that are found in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28. Brueggemann asserts that only in the context of the covenantal curses do these judgments make sense.¹¹⁶ Israel had already agreed to the Covenant terms at Sinai; the judgments in Hosea follow along the same themes as the curses promised for the breaking of the Covenant.

Moreover, the judgments in Hosea are the reversal of promised care for the wife, that is, to feed and clothe her. The judgments call for the ‘stripping of the land naked’, removing her feasts and her crops, all because she ‘went after her other lovers; but Me, she forgot’ (2:13).

The next section declares the restoration and salvation of Israel. With verse 13 ending with the final indictment ‘and me they forgot’, the reader might expect the third punishment to be, ‘and I will forget them.’¹¹⁷ But the opposite is declared. Yahweh changes his approach and allures Israel into the wilderness, possibly symbolic of the place where she was faithful to him at the beginning of the relationship.¹¹⁸ The verb ‘allures’ has heavy overtones of seduction. But it also informs us of the intensity of love that jealous Yahweh still possesses for his people Israel. She is promised that her former troubles, the Valley of Achor, will become a door of hope. ‘And there she will respond to me as she did in the days of her youth’ (2:15). The sense of the word ‘respond’ has also been translated as ‘answer’ and ‘sing’. But respond is a better word in keeping with the marriage metaphor.¹¹⁹

In the following verses, the formula ‘in that day’, is used four times. This could indicate an eschatological aspect to these promises. In the first, Yahweh declares, ‘In that day, you will call me “my husband”. You will no longer call me “my Baal”’

¹¹⁴ M. Friedman explains this appears to be the customary divorce formula and uses it to derive a possible marriage formula in Ancient Israel, ‘Israel’s Response in Hosea 2:17b: “You Are My Husband”’, *JBL* 99/2, 199-204.

¹¹⁵ D. Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, Waco: Word, 1987, 47.

¹¹⁶ W. Brueggemann, *Tradition for Crisis*, Richmond: John Knox, 1968, 62. He argues that the curses in Lev. 26 and Deut. 28 ‘are clearly assumed by the prophets...Without this kind of curse tradition which has previously been sanctioned in Israel, the prophetic sentences are difficult to understand and impossible to accept.’

¹¹⁷ D.A. Hubbard, *Hosea*, Leicester: IVP, 1989, 83.

¹¹⁸ MacIntosh, *Hosea*, 70.

¹¹⁹ Friedman, ‘Response’, 200.

(2:16). The word '*ishi*' is translated as 'my husband' and the word '*baali*' as 'my master'. Both words were used for husband, but '*ishi*' also means man, or in the context of marriage, 'my special man'. *Baali* means 'lord, owner'.¹²⁰

Yahweh will remove of the name of Baal from the mouths of Israel, and Baal will no longer be remembered (2:17). This statement presupposes a syncretism, a mix-up of Yahweh's identity with Baal.¹²¹ Brueggemann argues that religious syncretism was one of the roots of the Covenant crisis that resulted in Israel's judgment.¹²²

The next promise of 'in that day', foretells a covenant that the Lord will make with creation, ensuring peace and safety in the land. The third promise is Yahweh's declaration, 'In that day, I will betroth you to me forever' (2:19). The restoration of the marriage will renew the 'virginity' of the people of Israel.¹²³

There are five attributes that compose this new betrothal: righteousness, justice, steadfast love, compassion, and faithfulness. These are the characteristics that Israel lacked.¹²⁴ These may be understood as the *mohar*, the gifts that Yahweh brings to the renewed marriage. Davies, however, argues that these are divine attributes without necessarily 'any echoes of marriage customs'.¹²⁵ The result of the renewal is this: 'you will know Yahweh.' It is also a reversal of what was spoken of Israel in verse 13, 'but Me, she forgot.'¹²⁶ The most important aspect of this new betrothal is the knowledge of God.¹²⁷

The verb 'to know' is also a euphemism for cohabitation or consummation, though in this context it relates to knowing Yahweh in the fullness of a covenanted relationship.¹²⁸ Heschel emphasizes that *yada* is not only an intellectual knowledge of facts. The knowledge of God is an emotional identification with God as well as intellectual. Knowing God 'means *sympathy for God*, attachment of the whole person, his love as well as his knowledge; an act of involvement, attachment or commitment to

¹²⁰ Mays, *Hosea*, 48.

¹²¹ Wolff, *Hosea*, 49-50. He suggests the syncretism in Hosea's day could be similar to that recorded in the Elephantine papyri, where Yahweh was paired with various female deities.

¹²² Brueggemann, *Crisis*, 121.

¹²³ Stienstra, *YHWH*, 121.

¹²⁴ Amos, Hosea's contemporary, decried Israel's injustice, lack of care for the poor, and unrighteousness, while Hosea's oracles also pronounced judgment on the unfaithfulness and lack of love or knowledge of God.

¹²⁵ G.I. Davies, *Hosea*, London: Harper Collins, 1992, 86.

¹²⁶ MacIntosh, *Hosea*, 84.

¹²⁷ Hubbard, *Hosea*, 76, 89.

¹²⁸ Stuart, *Hosea*, 60.

God.’¹²⁹ It is not ‘a knowledge *about* God, but an awareness *of* God, a sensitivity for what concerns Him, a concern for the divine person, not only for the divine will... a concern that involves inwardness as well as action.’¹³⁰

The knowledge of God includes his steadfast love, and our response of walking in this *hesed*. It is the antithesis of the ‘spirit of harlotry’.¹³¹

The fourth ‘in that day’ introduces the reversal of the children’s names (2:21-23). God will once again sow Israel into the land; the literal, positive meaning of Jezreel will be realized with an abundance of grain, wine, and oil. Yahweh will have mercy on Lo-Ruhamah. To Lo-Ammi, he will say, ‘You are My people’; his people will respond, ‘You are my God.’ It is the reversal of the accusations that we saw at the beginning of the book. God will restore his people Israel, and they will know that he is their God.

Jeremiah

As a youth, Jeremiah began his ministry to the Southern Kingdom, during the reign of Josiah. He witnessed the comprehensive reforms of Josiah during his ministry, and the fall of Jerusalem decades later. Whereas Hosea married Gomer to display Israel’s unfaithfulness, Jeremiah was commanded not to marry due to the impending judgment (16:1). However, from the start of his ministry he employs similar imagery to Hosea.¹³²

In his first oracle, the young prophet describes Israel as a Bride who followed Yahweh in the wilderness, but then became corrupted. Fretheim underscores that the marriage between Yahweh and Israel was a pre-Sinai reality, and the Sinai Covenant merely formalizes the ‘already existing relationship’.¹³³ The prophet expresses Yahweh’s indictments against Israel; yet he begins with a question, ‘What wrong did your fathers find with me?’ (Jer. 2:5). Brueggemann comments that the tone resembles that of a ‘wounded lover’.¹³⁴ He argues that Jeremiah uses the *rif* format to structure his poetry and increase the rhetorical impact.¹³⁵ Craigie, Kelley, and Drinkward argue that

¹²⁹ A.J. Heschel, *The Prophets*, New York: Harper & Row, 1969, 59.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹³² W.L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 2*, Minneapolis: Fortress: 1989, 45-47.

¹³³ T.E. Fretheim, *Jeremiah*, Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2002, 63. Yahweh calls Israel ‘my people’ throughout Exodus 1-18 (e.g. 3:7; 22:9).

¹³⁴ W. Brueggemann, *To Pluck Up, To Tear Down*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988, 33.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

the purpose of this discourse is not legal but explanatory.¹³⁶ However, the prophet proceeds to describe the wrongs that Israel has done, employing ‘unremitting imagery’ that is ‘often gross, offensive, even sarcastic’ at times.¹³⁷ Israel has abandoned God and ‘covenantal sensitivities have so collapsed that Israel is unable to recognize the quality and shape of its actions.’¹³⁸

Scholars debate whether the language in this discourse is a mixture of literal and metaphoric language, particularly the accusation, ‘you bowed down like a whore’ (2:20). It might be a literal depiction of cultic prostitution;¹³⁹ the prophet’s use of ‘bow’ may be a word play with ‘prostitute’.¹⁴⁰ While it is possible, such an interpretation can minimize the reality of bowing to an idol being cast as spiritual harlotry.

The severity of Israel’s apostasy is framed as grounds for divorce. Jeremiah recalls the divorce law, which forbids the husband to remarry his previously divorced wife (Jer. 3:1; Deut. 24:1-4). Yahweh, according to his own law, should detach himself from Israel. But Yahweh still calls Israel to return to him, despite this law (3:14, 22). It is Yahweh’s deep pathos for Israel that compels this overriding of his own law. ‘God explicitly sets aside the law in this case...God’s “mercy is greater than His justice.”’¹⁴¹

In the Book of Consolation, Chapters 30-31, there is another interesting use of the marriage metaphor. While in other oracles the prophet employs the metaphor’s negative aspect of harlotry, in Chapter 31, the usage is entirely positive. Yahweh speaks lovingly to ‘virgin Israel’, proclaiming his everlasting love. The coupling of ‘everlasting’ with ‘*hesed*’ emphasizes the extraordinary depth of God’s love for his people.¹⁴² Restoration of his people is envisioned as a young maiden dancing joyfully with tambourines (Jer. 31:4). Stienstra argues that as in Hosea, God transforms his people’s apostasy into a state of spiritual virginity.¹⁴³ Their relationship is completely renewed and past adultery has been removed; Yahweh restores Israel’s purity.

¹³⁶ P.C. Craigie, P.H. Kelley, and J.F. Drinkward, Jr., *Jeremiah 1-25*, Dallas: Word, 1991, 51.

¹³⁷ Fretheim, *Jeremiah*, 68. He refers specifically here to verses, 2:20-37.

¹³⁸ Brueggemann, *Pluck*, 38.

¹³⁹ Craigie, Kelley, and Drinkward, *Jeremiah*, 37; Stienstra, *YHWH*, 163. As earlier noted, scholarship is split on the role of cultic prostitution.

¹⁴⁰ Ortland, *Whoredom*, 85n26.

¹⁴¹ Fretheim, *Jeremiah*, 75; Brueggemann, *Pluck*, 40f.

¹⁴² Fretheim, *Jeremiah*, 429.

¹⁴³ Stienstra, *YHWH*, 121.

This marital imagery continues in the promise of the New Covenant (31:31-34). Verse 32 proclaims the reason for the New Covenant: Israel had been unfaithful to Yahweh, and broke the Covenant he made with them at Sinai. In the Masoretic text, 31:32b reads, ‘though I was a husband to them’. However, the Septuagint, utilized by the author of Hebrews, expresses a very different sentiment, ‘so I showed no concern to them.’ Feinberg offers an explanation for this difference: the Hebrew word *bali*, used here for ‘husband’, is similar to *gali*, which can be translated as ‘disregarded’ or ‘abhorred’. The formation of *b* and the *g* are very similar in the Hebrew, and could be a scribal issue.¹⁴⁴

However, the marital language continues in the New Covenant formulation with the declaration, ‘I will be their God and they will be my people’ (Jer. 31:33).

The nature of this Covenant is completely new. The Lord himself will put his Law in the minds of the people and write it on their hearts. It will be an internalized knowledge of God, not an external teaching written on tablets of stone. All his people will know him as God.

Feinberg reminds us that it is God’s gift to us within the New Covenant that enables us to live righteously, as ‘his people’.

The core of the new covenant is God’s gift of a new heart (cf. Ezek 36:25-27). Herein lies the sufficient motivation for obeying God’s law. Basic to obedience is inner knowledge of God’s will coupled with an enablement to perform it, all founded on the assurance that sins are forgiven...Thus gratitude for forgiveness will issue in spontaneous obedience.¹⁴⁵

In both Covenants, Yahweh’s desire for exclusive relationship with his people remains the same, ‘I will be their God, and they will be my people.’¹⁴⁶

Ezekiel

Ezekiel prophesied in Babylon during the exile.¹⁴⁷ While the exiles were questioning if Yahweh had forgotten them, Ezekiel expresses that Yahweh was very much involved in their deportation. They had been unfaithful; Yahweh was punishing them for their idolatry and reliance on other political alliances for deliverance and provision.

¹⁴⁴ C.L. Feinberg, *Jeremiah*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982, 221f. It could also be a result of the Septuagint’s translators’ tendency to avoid anthropomorphisms.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 220f.

¹⁴⁶ Jer. 31:33; Ex. 29:45; Lev. 26:12.

¹⁴⁷ See M. Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1-20*, New York: Doubleday, 1983, 8-17, for authorship and dates of the book; cf. W. Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979, 9-16.

Chapters 16 and 23 are graphic depictions of Israel as a debauched, adulterous wife. These discourses are the longest oracles in Ezekiel. Outside of these two chapters, the prophet rarely employs this imagery (6:9; 20:30; 43:7, 9). He does not incorporate a new betrothal in these oracles.

Some commentators treat the allegories in the strictest sense, attempting to find the relationship between the imagery and history, but they do not present ‘a perfect mirror of reality’.¹⁴⁸ Stienstra points out that Ezekiel’s metaphorical discourses do not have a strict one-to-one correspondence with historical events. Rather, by looking at the imagery through the lens of the marriage metaphor, one can see the interaction between the networks of association with both the historical events and the imagery of adultery.¹⁴⁹

In Chapter 16, the prophet describes Israel as a discarded baby who Yahweh cares for and eventually marries. Whether it is the people or the city of Jerusalem is subject to debate. Because it is written, ‘Your mother... father’, it is arguable that the prophet is referring to Jerusalem and her origins as an Amorite city. However, Greenberg argues that the Covenant is made with the people of Israel, metaphorically referred to as Jerusalem.¹⁵⁰

When the orphan is of marriageable age, Yahweh covers the girl with his garment, and enters into covenant with her. Yahweh takes his young Bride and lavishes her with royal beauty, provision, and endowments. But rather than responding with faithfulness, she pursues other ‘lovers’, other gods and political alliances that she hopes will ensure her safety. She commits spiritual adultery and becomes a whore. Ezekiel pronounces vitriolic judgments upon the adulteress. However, there is the hope of restoration and the promise of an ‘everlasting covenant’ with Israel given at the end of this oracle. Even with this promise of restoration, the emphasis remains clearly on Israel’s guilt and Yahweh’s honour.

Though Israel will return to her own land and be forgiven, the sins of her past will not be forgotten. This oracle differs from the other prophets’ promise of a fresh new betrothal and renewed virginity for the people Israel.

¹⁴⁸ Stienstra, *YHWH*, 140.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 274.

Chapter 23 portrays Jerusalem and Samaria as two adulterous sisters, Oholibah and Oholah. Oholibah means ‘My Tent is in Her’¹⁵¹ while Oholah means ‘My Tent’ or ‘My Own Tent’.¹⁵² It is not certain whether this is referring to a bridal tent or the Tent of Meeting. Allen argues that it must be a bridal tent, as any compliment to Judah would be ‘out of place,’¹⁵³ even to associate the place of meeting with her. But it is more likely referring to the Temple or the presence of God.¹⁵⁴ If we incorporate this association, then the translation of ‘My Own Tent’ could refer to Samaria’s establishment of separate worship from the Temple in Jerusalem, her ‘defiant religious autonomy’.¹⁵⁵ The depravity of Jerusalem is described as worse than even the archetypical Sodom, who is the metaphorical third sister. The emphasis in this discourse seems to be on adultery through political alliances with Egypt and Assyria, while Chapter 16 appeared to have more of a spiritual adultery through cultic worship.¹⁵⁶ The wives are killed in this oracle, without a promise of new life in this context.¹⁵⁷ However, in Ezekiel 37 we see the resurrection with a different imagery, the Valley of Dry Bones coming to life once again, along with the promise of an everlasting covenant of peace, and Yahweh’s reaffirmation of ‘I will be their God, and they shall be my people’ (37:26f). There are additional promises of restoration: Yahweh will place his Spirit in his people, give them the gift of a new heart, and cause them to walk in his ways (11:17f; 36:25-27).

Ezekiel uses graphic language and imagery that are shocking and offensive. Darr strongly criticizes a commentator who describes the language as ‘almost vulgar’. Rather, she emphasizes, ‘It *is* vulgar.’¹⁵⁸ Even rabbis banned Ezekiel 16 from public reading.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵¹ S. Gravett, ‘Oholibah: Woman/Whore Jerusalem’, in C. Meyers (ed.), *Women in Scripture*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000, 538.

¹⁵² S. Gravett, ‘Oholah: Woman Samaria’, in C. Meyers (ed.), *Women in Scripture*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000, 536-538, citing 536.

¹⁵³ L.C. Allen, *Ezekiel 20-48*, Waco: Word, 1990, 48.

¹⁵⁴ Gravett, ‘Oholibah’, 538; Ortland, *Whoredom*, 120.

¹⁵⁵ Ortland, *Whoredom*, 120n52.

¹⁵⁶ Allen, *Ezekiel*, 48, though 16:26-29 points to political alliances with Egypt.

¹⁵⁷ In Ezekiel 24, the prophet’s wife dies.

¹⁵⁸ K.P. Darr, ‘Ezekiel’s Justifications of God: Teaching Troubling Texts’, *JSOT* 55 (1992) 97-117, citing 105.

¹⁵⁹ Mishnah, *Megillah* 4:10, cited in Moughtin-Mumby, *Sexual*, 164; Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 347. Ortland apologizes to the reader for his ‘shocking’ and ‘offensive’ explanation of the text; his excuse is that his ‘conscience is bound to the text’, to explain what it ‘states or infers’, *Whoredom*, 125n70. However, his elucidation is indeed offensive.

Ezekiel's discourses remain associated with the traditions found in Hosea and Jeremiah, depicting covenantal unfaithfulness as adultery.

Isaiah

Isaiah prophesied during the reigns of the Judean kings, Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. His ministry perhaps spanned over 60 years, beginning around the time of the death of Uzziah about 740 BCE until after the death of Sennacherib about 680 BCE. The prophets Hosea in the North and Micah in the South were his contemporaries. In its canonical form the book of Isaiah has 66 chapters, but scholars approach this work as the construct of more than one author.¹⁶⁰

The book begins with railing judgments against the people of Judah; Isaiah declares that the once just, righteous and faithful city of Jerusalem has become a 'harlot', full of murderers (1:21). He also portrays covenantal unfaithfulness as spiritual harlotry.¹⁶¹ It is interesting to note, that his understanding of the harlotry of Jerusalem includes neglecting the justice commanded by Yahweh. The lack of righteousness and disregard of the demands of the Covenant incurred the condemnation of Yahweh.

In Second Isaiah, the author uses the positive aspects of the marriage metaphor to speak of restoration and renewed Covenant. Blenkinsopp comments

Right at the beginning of Isa 40-55, prophets are urged to speak tender words to the woman Jerusalem (40:2 cf. 41:27, 51:3), unlike their predecessors, who often subjected her to verbal abuse, sometimes in the coarsest terms.¹⁶²

The restoration language in these passages belongs to 'the semantic field of covenant'.¹⁶³

¹⁶⁰ Chapters 1-39 are generally attributed to Isaiah, who is also mentioned in 2 Chronicles and 2 Kings. Chapters 40-66 are considered to be written later by at least one additional author. See C. Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66*, London: SCM, 1969, 3-8, and R.N. Whybray, *Isaiah 40-66*, London: Oliphants, 1975, 20-25, for a discussion of the authorship of Deutero-Isaiah; J.D.W. Watts, *Isaiah 1-33*, Waco: Word, 1985, xxv-xxxii, and J.N. Oswalt, *Isaiah 1-39*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986, 23-28 for a unified authorship point of view.

¹⁶¹ Only in Is. 1:21 do we find the word 'harlot'. Additionally, some scholars see Is. 5, the metaphor of the vineyard, as a symbol of a woman and include it in the marital imagery, D.M. Carr, 'Gender', 239. Cf. Watts, *Isaiah 1-33*, 56. Watts, however, argues that even though the opening verses 'anticipate a wedding song for the bridegroom about his bride...the figure remains a vineyard'; the association has to be imagined.

¹⁶² J. Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40-55*, New York: Doubleday, 2002, 359.

¹⁶³ N. Lohfink and E. Zenger, *God of Israel and the Nations*, Collegeville: Liturgical, 2000, 50; Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah*, 363.

In Chapter 50, Zion is asked, 'Where is your certificate of divorce?' This can be understood as a rhetorical question, implying that a divorce certificate does not exist. A woman who was divorced would never lose her certificate, for it ensured her freedom to remarry. Yahweh establishes that Judah is indeed still married to Yahweh, despite the exile.

This imagery is continued in Chapter 54. Zion is likened to a barren woman, a widow, and a cast off wife. However, she is told not to fear as Yahweh reassures her that he is still her Husband.¹⁶⁴ Here we find the explicit declaration of 'Your Maker is your Husband' (54:5). The Lord is also called her 'Redeemer'.¹⁶⁵ While the concept of redeeming is common in this 'book of comfort', it is particularly appropriate in conjunction with the use of this metaphor.¹⁶⁶

In verse 7, Yahweh declares, 'For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with great compassion I will gather you.' This statement reinforces the idea that the exile was only a temporary separation.¹⁶⁷ It appears that 'Yahweh [is] coming as close to an expression of regret or apology for exile as is possible.'¹⁶⁸

Words of reassurance follow, including that Yahweh will not be angry in this manner again; rather his 'steadfast love shall not depart' from his people nor 'covenant of peace' be removed because he has compassion on Zion (54:10). The restored city is depicted as bejewelled (54:11f).

Isaiah 62 carries over the same themes as Chapter 54; verses 1-5 are an illustration of those promises.¹⁶⁹ Zion, who was once called 'Forsaken' and 'Desolate' is renamed as 'My Delight Is in Her' and 'Married'. This renaming has been seen as a part of the covenantal renewal, and a reassurance of Yahweh's love and commitment to his people, personified as his restored Wife Zion.¹⁷⁰ 'As a bridegroom rejoices over his bride,' Yahweh will once again rejoice over his people (62:5).

¹⁶⁴ K. Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah*, Philadelphia: Augsburg Fortress, 2001, 437f.

¹⁶⁵ J.D.W. Watts, *Isaiah 34-66*, Waco: Word, 1987, 237. The prophet 'piles up' the words of relationship, emphasizing the reversal.

¹⁶⁶ W. Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998, 152. Cf. Ruth 3, 4.

¹⁶⁷ J. Goldingay, *The Message of Isaiah 40-55*, T&T Clark, 2005, 530; cf. Blekinsopp, *Isaiah*, 360.

¹⁶⁸ Brueggemann, *Isaiah*, 153. Furthermore, considering God's apology is an issue for 'high Christian theology'. He suggests 'taking the Friday-abandonment of the cross seriously and without toning it down', 153f.

¹⁶⁹ Baltzer, *Deutero*, 435.

¹⁷⁰ T. D. Andersen, 'Renaming and Wedding Imagery in Isaiah 62', *Bib* 67 (1986), 75-80. Renaming happened in the context of Yahweh's covenant with Abraham; Abram was changed to Abraham and Sarai to Sarah. Cf. B. Halpern, 'The New Names of Isaiah 62:4: Jeremiah's Reception in the Restoration and Politics of "Third Isaiah"', *JBL* 117/4 (1998), 623-643, citing 626.

There is another metaphorical reference to a bridegroom in Isaiah. It is found at the end of Chapter 61, in the discourse of the Servant. Here, he speaks of being clothed by the Lord in ‘garments of salvation’ and the ‘robe of righteousness as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels’ (61:10).

The imagery in Isaiah is predominantly of restoration. It is a reversal of the ‘abusive’ and ‘vulgar’ language employed by the other Prophets.

Psalm 45

In the Psalms there are few references to marital imagery, but Psalm 45 is the exception. It is unique in several aspects.¹⁷¹ First of all, it is the only love song in the Psalms; it describes a royal wedding. Secondly, the narrator identifies himself at the beginning the psalm and the end, forming an *inclusio*. Lastly, the king is addressed with the title, *elohim*, ‘god’; this seems to be at odds with Yahwism, which condemns any worship of other gods.

It was most likely written most likely during the First Temple monarchy.¹⁷² While scholars attempt to ascribe it to a specific king, the internal evidence does not clearly point to any one monarch.¹⁷³

Craigie argues that the poet first delivered the psalm orally, then later transcribed it.¹⁷⁴ The narrator addresses his praises to the king, extolling his virtues. Verses 10-15 refer to the queen, extolling her beauty. She is exhorted to forget her people and her father’s house for the king is enthralled with her beauty (45:10f).

The final verses are a declaration that ‘I will make his renown known through all generations’ (45:17). It could be that the narrator is promising to continue to extol the king, and through his poem, the king will always be remembered. This would form an *inclusio*.¹⁷⁵ However, if it is a prophetic declaration from God, then it would refer to the perpetuation of the king’s dynasty through his children.

The question arises as to how this Psalm became associated with the Messiah, and how early was this association made. Crim argues that because Psalm 45 is in the

¹⁷¹ J.L. Mays, *Psalms*, Louisville: John Knox, 1994, 181.

¹⁷² J. Goldingay, *Psalms 42-89*, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007, 55.

¹⁷³ P.C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, Waco: Word, 1983, 338; H.J. Kraus, *Psalms 1-59*, Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988, 453-454.

¹⁷⁴ Craigie, 339.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 340.

corpus of royal psalms, it became associated with the Messiah. The messianic expectations in the Second Temple period were for a Davidic King; therefore the attributes ascribed to the king in this psalm are applied to the messianic figure.¹⁷⁶ The emphasis of this psalm is not the figure of a bridegroom *per se* but of a triumphant warrior king whose virtues are extolled. The Messiah was not specifically considered a bridegroom until later.

In the Targum, this psalm points to the Messiah; ‘Thy beauty, O king Messiah, is greater than that of the children of men.’¹⁷⁷ But the focus is not that he is a bridegroom, rather that the Messiah is king. Moreover, it is impossible to date the origin of this saying, or that it was current in the Second Temple period;¹⁷⁸ this Targum is dated from the sixth century or possibly later.¹⁷⁹

The author of Hebrews quotes Psalm 45:6f, ‘But of the Son he says, “Your throne O God will last forever and ever...”’ (Heb 1:8f). However, Carr argues that its use is to establish a strong ‘theological basis of kingship’.¹⁸⁰ The author does not elaborate the text or draw out any nuptial associations, nor does he utilize nuptial or marital imagery elsewhere in the epistle. In addition, the Psalm is not quoted elsewhere in the New Testament.

Nevertheless, the Church Fathers ascribed this psalm to the relationship of Christ and the Church, associating it with the allegorical interpretation of Song of Songs. Some modern commentators continue to follow this association,¹⁸¹ while others argue that ‘They are hardly correct.’¹⁸² Carr explains that the terms used to describe the bride in this section exclude ‘the possibility of taking this passage as referring to the Church as the bride of Christ’.¹⁸³ The verb translated as ‘desire’ is to be understood as ‘lust’ in a negative way; ‘beauty’ can be associated with pagan offerings to gods in Ugaritic

¹⁷⁶ K.R. Crim, *The Royal Psalms*, Richmond: John Knox, 1962, 67-68, 96.

¹⁷⁷ Mays, *Psalms*, 181-182, citing Targum of Psalm 45:2.

¹⁷⁸ J. Neusner, *Rabbinic Literature and the New Testament*, Valley Forge: Trinity, 1994, 2, 15, 85f. He cautions scholars to not press the rabbinic texts for historical details that they cannot show.

¹⁷⁹ J. Neusner, *Introduction to Rabbinic Literature*, New York: Doubleday, 1994, 618.

¹⁸⁰ G.L. Carr, ‘The Old Testament Love Songs and Their Use in the New Testament’, *JETS* 24/2 (1981), 97-105, citing 103. *Contra* D. Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, Leicester: IVP, 1977, 172. He argues that these verses only make sense when they are ascribed to Christ.

¹⁸¹ Craigie, *Psalms*, 341; Kidner, *Psalms*, 172.

¹⁸² Kraus, *Psalms*, 457.

¹⁸³ G.L. Carr, ‘Old’, 103.

texts; the word used for ‘queen’ actually means ‘harem favourite’ and was ‘considered obscene’.¹⁸⁴ Therefore he concludes that the psalm does not refer to the Bride of Christ.

It is doubtful that the author intended the poem to be an allegory of the divine-human relationship. Nevertheless, the metaphor of marriage has provided a bridge for this association to be made. Psalm 45, along with Song of Songs, continue to be understood as symbolic of the relationship Christ and the Church.

Song of Songs

The Song of Songs is a love poem attributed to Solomon. However, scholars debate as to whether it is a drama depicting Solomon, a single unit written by Solomon, or a collection of poems composed by a variety of authors over a longer period.¹⁸⁵ Because of the distinct female tone, it is debated if women authored it or at least contributed to the authorship.¹⁸⁶

The Song is a passionate love poem rhapsodizing the love between a man and a woman, the Lover and his Beloved, in metaphorical language. It resembles other ANE love poetry, particularly that of Egypt.¹⁸⁷ It reflects a period of great prosperity in Israel.

Traditionally, the Song has been thought to be a wedding song written by or for Solomon on the occasion of his wedding to Pharaoh’s daughter. It has been posited that it was originally written as an allegory of the divine-human relationship.¹⁸⁸ But modern scholarship, while acknowledging the tradition, has generally opted for the natural reading of the text.¹⁸⁹ Pope proposes the author(s) had other purposes for the song such as its use in cultic worship¹⁹⁰, while Hess argues that the ‘Song fills in a

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁵ For an overview of recent scholarship, see R.S. Hess, *Song of Songs*, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005, 25-29. Pope details the scholarship of the 20th century and gives a good overview of reception history, M.H. Pope, *Song of Songs*, Garden City: Doubleday, 1977, 89-229. For an older but helpful discussion, see H.H. Rowley, *The Servant of the Lord and Other Essays on the Old Testament*, London: Lutterworth, 1952, 189-234.

¹⁸⁶ A. Brenner, ‘Women Poets and Authors’ in A. Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to the Song of Songs*, Sheffield: SAP, 1993, 86-97, citing 88; also D.M. Carr, ‘Ancient’, 13.

¹⁸⁷ D. Garrett, *Song of Songs*, Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004, 49-57. C. Rabin points out similarities between the Song and ancient Tamil poetry, ‘Song of Songs and Tamil Poetry’, *SR* 3:3 (1973), 205-219.

¹⁸⁸ Rabin, ‘Song’, 217.

¹⁸⁹ A. Brenner declares that the Song cannot be ‘anything else but what it declares itself to be by its contents: songs of love and love-making between heterosexual humans’, ‘“My” Song of Songs’ in A. Brenner and C. R. Fontaine (eds.), *The Song of Songs*, Sheffield: SAP, 2000, 154-168, citing 162.

¹⁹⁰ Pope, *Song*, 145-153. His theory is that it was part of a funeral celebration, 210-229.

necessary vacuum in the Scripture because it endorses sex and celebrates it beyond all expectation' — within marriage, that is.¹⁹¹

The Song might simply be a collection of various poems by various poets in various centuries, but Garrett convincingly argues that the chiasmic structure and unity indicate a single song.¹⁹² There are three voices: the Lover, the Beloved, and the Chorus. The rabbinic tradition interpreted it symbolically, rather than as a narrative. However, the Church Fathers cast it as an allegorical, romantic drama between Christ and the Church, and more often, the individual soul.

The Mishnah records a debate surrounding the canonization process. During the discussions of which books were holy, rabbis wrangled over whether the Song rendered the hands as 'unclean'. In the dispute, Rabbi Akiva proclaimed, that while all scripture was holy, the Song of Songs is the 'Holy of Holies'.¹⁹³ Rowley points out that the zealous comment of Akiva indicates the intensity of the dispute over the position of Song of Songs.¹⁹⁴ Not everyone agreed with Akiva's position. However, the dispute was eventually resolved, whether due to the symbolic value or because the Song was ascribed to Solomon.¹⁹⁵

It is important to consider that Akiva was of a mystical strand of Judaism,¹⁹⁶ and his symbolic understanding of the Song probably was limited to the 'elite, for a select few' even after canonization.¹⁹⁷ While an allegorical rendering of the song eventually became the common interpretation, it was not so clear in the first centuries.¹⁹⁸ Akiva is also recorded as condemning an irreverent public recital of the Song at a banqueting

¹⁹¹ Hess, *Song*, 35. He, of course, limits it to sex within marriage, although that parameter is not clear in the text of the Song.

¹⁹² Garrett, *Song*, 30-35.

¹⁹³ *Yad*. 3.5 cited in J. Neusner, *Israel's Love Affair with God*, Valley Forge: Trinity, 1993, 2f.

¹⁹⁴ Rowley, *Servant*, 190.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.* However, Garrett argues that the Song was probably already canonized before these debates recorded in the Mishnah, and that is the reason the rabbis sought to allegorize the song, *Song*, 14-15. Nevertheless, J. Neusner emphasizes that clearly, there was a point when 'the status of the Song of Songs [was] in doubt', *Love*, 3.

¹⁹⁶ E. Schulman, 'Akiva ben Joseph', in J.R. Baskin (ed.), *Cambridge Dictionary of Judaism and Jewish Culture*, Cambridge: CUP, 2011, 9. Pope argues that it was Akiva who championed the allegorical interpretations, *Song*, 92.

¹⁹⁷ Cohen, 'Song', 15.

¹⁹⁸ Tait argues, 'It is far from clear, therefore, that a first century author or reader would have read Canticles as in any way related to the prophetic theme of Yahweh, the Bridegroom/Husband', *Jesus*, 208. He also observes there is no clear citation or allusion to the Song in the rest of the OT or any of the Apocrypha or Pseudographia, *Jesus*, 202n4.

hall.¹⁹⁹ Apparently some of Akiva's contemporaries maintained the Song's natural sense.²⁰⁰ This comment underscores the presence of dissenting opinions of the Song in early Judaism.

Neusner argues that the symbolism of the Song provides language for expressing God's love for Israel.²⁰¹ Cohen comments that the rabbis were not 'duped' or 'deluded' by ascribing this poem to the divine-human relationship; they were 'horrified' by the *hieros gamos* myths of the pagan religions surrounding them.²⁰² Nor was it a religious gloss. He suggests that despite the intention of the author(s), perhaps these 'earliest readers felt that the Song, with all its direct and uninhibited expressions of sensual love, best expressed their highest and most profound religious sentiments.'²⁰³ It provides symbolic discourse to communicate the depth of their religious experience.

The intertestamental literature yields little indication of an allegorical interpretation.²⁰⁴ Stone argues that 4 Ezra, composed late in the first century or early second, shows the possibility of competing allegorical interpretations of the Song that may have been in use. There are a few references in 4 Ezra that contain typical love language, but it is language that could be found in any poetic love imagery, not only Song of Songs.²⁰⁵

The early rabbinic literature contains only scattered references of allegorical interpretations of certain verses.²⁰⁶ A full allegorical interpretation was not compiled until Song of Songs Rabbah, probably in the 6th century. Here, the author arranges comments of various rabbis to express a 'systematic theology' of the salvation history of Israel through the Song's symbolic language.²⁰⁷ Neusner argues that it is a theologically cogent document, with reoccurring themes of redemption from Egypt,

¹⁹⁹ *Tos. San.* 12:10, cited in M.E. Stone, 'The Interpretation of the Song of Songs in 4 Ezra', *JSJ* 38 (2007), 226-233, citing 226. It is possible the Song was used as a part of wedding celebrations, see G.L. Carr, *The Song of Solomon*, Leicester: IVP, 1984, 52-54.

²⁰⁰ Rowley, *Servant*, 190.

²⁰¹ Neusner, *Love*, 122.

²⁰² Cohen, 'Song', 2f.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁰⁴ Truncated copies of the Song were found at Qumran; however, there was no *peshet*. Therefore it is not certain that it was read allegorically, Tait, *Jesus*, 211.

²⁰⁵ 4 Ezra 5:24, 26; 7:26; Stone, 'Interpretation', 233. He also points to the cross-pollination of rabbinic and Christian allegorical interpretations that gave rise to the *Shiur Qomah* speculation, of the mystical body of God, in Song 5:11-16.

²⁰⁶ Mishnah on Song 3:11: 'in the day of his espousals—this is the giving of the Law; and in the day of the gladness of his heart—this is the building of the Temple.' *Ta'anith* IV.8, cited in Rowley, *Servant*, 191.

²⁰⁷ Neusner, *Love*, 116, 109-123.

Babylon, and at the end of days as well as the Red Sea, Sinai, and the world to come. He argues that the rabbis interpreted the song as symbolic of these events, but the book itself is not a drama.

In the third century, Origen, following Hippolytus, pioneered the Christian allegorical interpretation. He decided the Song of Songs was a romantic, allegorical drama, and cast Christ and the Church into the roles of the Lover and the Beloved. Origen argues in his Prologue, that if it is *the* Song of Songs, the best of the best of Solomon's work, the Song has to be about God, not about human love.²⁰⁸ Astell argues that Origen's abhorrence of 'carnal love', which led to his own self-castration, motivated him to allegorize the song.²⁰⁹

Nevertheless, the Song lacks the internal evidence to indicate it should be read allegorically; there are no indicators in the text that point to this type of understanding. Exum emphasizes that in scripture, we typically find qualifiers to allegories (2 Sam. 12:1-7; Is. 5:1-9).²¹⁰ For example, in Hosea 1-3, it is explicit that Hosea's marriage and children are symbolic of Yahweh's relationship with Israel. Both Ezekiel 16 and 23 explain that the marital metaphors pertain to Jerusalem or both Jerusalem and Samaria. Jeremiah clearly states it is Israel who was the Bride following Yahweh in the wilderness (Jer. 2:2f).

However, these explicit indicators of allegorical interpretations are not limited to the prophetic genre. Rabin argues that the longing expressed in the Song is similar to the longing for God described in Psalm 42, that of a deer panting for water.²¹¹ He contends this type of expression was current in the First Temple period, and that the poet constructed Song of Songs to present 'the erotic longing of the maiden as a simile for the need of man for God'.²¹² However, in Psalm 42, the author clearly states that this psalm is about his longing for God, and the reader is not left in the dark as to who is the referent. If the Song was intended to be read allegorically we would expect to find more signals to read it in that manner.

²⁰⁸ Origen, *The Song of Songs: Commentary and Homilies*, R.P. Lawson (ed. and trans.), New York: Newman, c.1956. We will explore the development of the impact of this song on the interpretation of Jesus the Bridegroom in the Reception History section.

²⁰⁹ A.W. Astell, *The Song of Songs in the Middle Ages*, New York: Cornell, 1990, 3. Origen embraced a Neo-Platonic worldview that differentiated between the two loves, earthly/carnal and divine/spiritual.

²¹⁰ J.C. Exum, *Song of Songs*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005, 76-77.

²¹¹ Rabin, 'Song', 217.

²¹² *Ibid.*

Moreover, the Song expresses a very egalitarian relationship between the two lovers, which is contrary to the prophetic metaphors for the hierarchal divine-human relationship.²¹³ Furthermore, the word for love, *hesed*, which is so prominent in Hosea and Jeremiah, does not appear in the Song.²¹⁴ The Prophets focused on the marriage relationship between Israel and Yahweh, including the lows and highs of spiritual adultery and restoration. Song of Songs focuses the interchange of love between the Lover and the Beloved. Whereas in the Prophets the male voice dominates, in the Song the female boldly takes the initiative.²¹⁵ Furthermore, there is no mention of God in the Song, except for a variant reading of verse 8:6 where jealousy is likened to ‘flashes of fire, the very flame of Yah’. This is based on the construct of the word *šalhebetyâ*. The issue is whether the suffix of *yâ* modifies the word flame, or if it is to be read as two words.²¹⁶ If the first option is taken, the translation would be ‘mighty flame’.²¹⁷ This reading is found in the Ben Asher tradition of the Masoretic text and also supported by the Septuagint and Vulgate. The Ben Naphtali tradition, however, was the one chosen by the redactors of the final edition of the Masoretic text, which embraces the two-word version, ‘the flame of Yah’.²¹⁸ Regardless, it is by no means certain that this reading was prominent in the first century.

The New Testament writers most likely would have had the Song of Songs available to them, regardless of the later development of the allegories. The Song was already included in the wisdom literature by the middle of the first century, in spite of debates regarding its canonical position. But the Song is not cited in the New Testament. Therefore, we argue that the New Testament writers intentionally did not incorporate the Song’s themes, but followed the prophetic use of the metaphor.²¹⁹ The New Testament reflects similar networks of association of patriarchal marriage and covenant.

²¹³ P. Tribble argues the Song reflects the Eden-like relationship before the fall, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978, 144-162.

²¹⁴ Tait, *Jesus*, 206.

²¹⁵ Brenner, ‘Women’, 87-91. She comments that the female voice is heard in more than half of the lines of the poem.

²¹⁶ Exum, *Song*, 253f.

²¹⁷ Garrett, *Song*, 255. He argues that *yâ/yh* at the ending of the word serves as a modifier and is not theologically significant.

²¹⁸ Exum, *Song*, 253. She translates the word as ‘almighty flame’.

²¹⁹ Tait, *Jesus*, 205f.

The Song is not a prescription or typology for our relationship with God. The New Testament does not offer evidence for a Christological reading of the Song.²²⁰ Therefore, while the Song can be a vehicle for expressing devotion to God, and indeed it has been through the ages, it is not a prescription of the type of relationship that we are to have with God.²²¹

Conclusion

In Hosea, we found the very explicit reference to Israel as the Wife of Yahweh. Indeed, the prophet and his wife were a prophetic act divinely commanded to display Israel's apostasy. The models of patriarchal marriage and covenant influenced both the proclamation and interpretation of this metaphor. The asymmetrical quality of patriarchal marriage allowed this metaphor to effectively communicate the allegiance that Israel owed God. Within the Covenant, there is latent marital language, such as reference to Yahweh's jealousy, Israel being his people, and he being their God. The curses that fell upon Israel for breaking Covenant were metaphorically presented as punishment for adultery. But within this tirade of judgments, Yahweh promised a restoration of the marriage: a new betrothal. The knowledge of God is critical to keeping Covenant. It is both the knowledge of God's ways and a sympathetic understanding of God.

Jeremiah picks up this metaphor. Similar networks of association are employed, but this prophet goes further to proclaim that a New Covenant is coming with the restored marriage. The New Covenant is an internalized *torah*, instruction, with the forgiveness of sins. Ezekiel's marital oracles proclaim further judgments on Israel's sins of whoredom. While he does not develop the imagery of a new betrothal, he prophesies that Yahweh will give his people a new heart, and put his Spirit in his people, so that they will know him and be able to walk in his ordinances. For rhetorical impact, these three prophets employed abusive, vulgar language to shock the male audience and help them understand the gravity of their apostasy.

Isaiah speaks words of comfort to Jerusalem, and his use of the marital imagery focuses on the restored relationship between Yahweh and his people.

²²⁰ G.L. Carr, *Song*, 31.

²²¹ *Ibid.*

The Prophets present a new model of covenant for the New Testament writers. A new betrothal is coming for the people of God with a new type of Covenant; Yahweh's Spirit will be in his people to help them walk in his ways, and he will forgive all the sins of his people. But the expectation of covenantal faithfulness continues.

Psalm 45 speaks of a royal wedding while Song of Songs presents a metaphorical romantic exchange between two lovers. These love songs were available as models, but it is unlikely that an association with the prophetic metaphor of Yahweh as the Husband of His People was prevalent. We will discover that the New Testament writers who employed the Bridegroom metaphor followed the prophetic model, incorporating similar networks of association that informed the seers.

NEW TESTAMENT

Introduction

The metaphor of Jesus the Bridegroom is not explicitly stated in the New Testament; there is no 'I am the Bridegroom' statement included. But nuptial imagery and references to Jesus as the Bridegroom appear in all four Gospels, the Pauline corpus, and Revelation. In James, we find the metaphor used as an indictment against unfaithfulness in the new Church. The New Testament writers employed the metaphor in various ways to call God's people to faithfulness in the New Covenant.

The models used by the New Testament writers are similar to those that informed the Prophets: patriarchal marriage and covenant. The prophetic promise of the New Covenant in betrothal terms is the foundational model of Jesus the Bridegroom.

Additionally, New Testament writers incorporated the wedding customs of the first century and the concept of an eschatological banquet. After a brief look at the first century models, we will proceed with our examination of the metaphor through the Gospels, Epistles, and Apocalypse.

Wedding Customs In the First Century The information we have about wedding customs in Israel in the Second Temple period is limited. Argyle comments that what we do know is imprecise because traditions varied from region to region; there is not one prevailing set of wedding practices.²²² The primary marriage customs from the Old Testament period appear to be followed: the betrothal agreement with the *mohar* and dowry, the wedding feast, and the bride entering into the home of the husband's family. However, there are additional customs such as a more sacramental betrothal vow, expressing that the wife was 'holy' to the husband or consecrated to him; a pre-nuptial bath in preparation for the wedding; a bridal procession to the groom's home for the ceremony and consummation; and the role of the *shoshebin*, serving as the best man or agent of the bridegroom in the preparation of the celebrations.²²³ The

²²² A.W. Argyle, 'Wedding Customs at the Time of Jesus', *ExpTim* 86 (1975), 214f.

²²³ In Judges 14:20, Samson's Philistine bride is given to the *shoshebin*. This word is only mentioned here in the Old Testament, though the 'best man' is attested in ANE literature. It is unclear when the *shoshebin* became common practice in Israel. Cf. J. McHugh, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on John 1-4*, London: T&T Clark, 2009, 251.

shoshebin would stand at the door of the *chupa*, the bridal chamber, and wait for the shout of the bridegroom, announcing the consummation of the marriage.²²⁴ Friends of the bridal chamber were trusted friends of the bridegroom who watched over the bride as she stayed in the *chupa*, during the weeklong festivities.²²⁵ These are the significant additions reflected in the New Testament period.

Second Temple Literature In the existent intertestamental writings, there are few references to weddings; the metaphor of marriage between Yahweh and his people is rare in these works.²²⁶ Satlow argues that Hellenistic influences are one of the main causes for the neglect of the marriage metaphor.²²⁷

However, we posit that the metaphor was not forgotten, but it remained a part of the Hebrew mindset.²²⁸ The New Testament writers had no trouble picking up this metaphor even though perhaps it had been largely dormant in the Second Temple period. Perhaps the realization of Jesus establishing the New Covenant reactivated the metaphor, and brought the reality of the Bridegroom into prominence.

Another relevant theme in the literature is the eschatological banquet. While there is not a ‘banquet’ per se, Long concludes that the concept of eschatological abundance with on-going feasting is current in the Second Temple period.²²⁹

Hellenistic Myths As in the ANE religions, pagan worship in the Hellenistic world included *hieros gamos* mythology. Cultic prostitution could be interpreted as ‘opportunity for communion with the deity and immortality’.²³⁰ Batey argues these myths and practices may have influenced the development of the Bridegroom

²²⁴ L.J. Archer, *Her Price Is Beyond Rubies*, Sheffield: SAP, 1990, 203-205.

²²⁵ A. Büchler, ‘The Induction of the Bride and the Bridegroom into the [*chupa*] in the First and Second Centuries in Palestine’, in *Committee of the Grand Synagogue of Warsaw*, I, Warsaw: unknown, 1927, 82-132.

²²⁶ M.L. Satlow, ‘The Metaphor of Marriage in Early Judaism’, in A. Brenner and J.W. van Henten (eds.), *Families and Family Relations as Represented in Early Judaism and Early Christianities*, Liederdorp: Deo, 2000, 13-44, citing 14, 22.

²²⁷ Satlow, ‘Metaphor’, 23. The Septuagint also reflects this denuptialization tendency, as we saw in Jeremiah 31:32b. This is reflective of the general trend to euphemize anthropomorphisms in the LXX, A.T. Hanson, ‘The Treatment in the LXX of the Theme of Seeing God’, in G.J. Brooke and B. Lindars (eds.), *Septuagint, Scrolls and Cognate Writings*, Atlanta, 1992, 557-68, cited by Satlow.

²²⁸ Cohen argues that the covenant is portrayed in marital terms from the foundations, and thereby the marriage metaphor is an integral part of the Israelite worldview, ‘Song’, 6-8.

²²⁹ Long, *Jesus*, 149-167.

²³⁰ Batey, *Nuptial*, 11.

metaphor.²³¹ However, it is unlikely that the Jewish Christian writers of the New Testament would have intentionally borrowed from those traditions. Jesus' own ministry, fulfilling of prophetic promise of a new betrothal and Covenant, supplies ample resources for the New Testament metaphor of Jesus the Bridegroom.

John

The author of the Fourth Gospel, the Beloved Disciple, has traditionally been held to be the Apostle John, the son of Zebedee.²³² John wrote the gospel with the express purpose of communicating the identity of Jesus and the New Covenant, that we may believe (20:31). The gospel is rich with symbolism, so rich, in fact, many scholars consider it to be a literary construction with little historical value. Regardless of its historicity, the nuptial imagery is significant in this gospel.

In Chapters 2-4 we find an *inclusio*, formed by the first and second signs performed by Jesus at Cana.²³³ The first sign takes place at the wedding in Cana, while the second sign is of the healing of the official's son. While Lincoln affirms the *inclusio* of the first and second signs, McHugh argues that the wedding at Cana is part of the previous section of calling the disciples.²³⁴ He emphasizes the point of the miracle of changed water into wine is to display Christ's glory, for the sake of the disciples putting their faith in him. Beasley-Murray sees the second sign, the healing of the official's son, as a part of the following section of healings.²³⁵ However, the first and second signs seem to define an *inclusio*.

In this *inclusio*, there are two more uses of nuptial imagery: John the Baptist's testimony and the scene with the Samaritan woman. Amidst this imagery, the Evangelist outlines the new order of worship in the New Covenant.

The three chapters together present the replacement of the old purifications by the wine of the kingdom of God, the old temple by the new in the risen Lord, and exposition of new birth for the new creation, a contrast between the water of Jacob's well with the

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 36f. He sees Ephesians 5:25-32 as a possible example of this influence.

²³² The authorship, setting, and dating are widely debated in Johannine scholarship. See A.T. Lincoln, *The Gospel According to John*, London: Continuum, 2005, 17-26 for a discussion of current issues; D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Leicester: IVP, 1991, 23-40; J.R. Michaels, *The Gospel of John*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010, 6-24 specifically regarding authorship; 37-42 for discussion of date and setting.

²³³ Lincoln, *John*, 124.

²³⁴ McHugh, *John*, 113. He argues it is a part of the 'first week'.

²³⁵ G.R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, Waco: Word, 1987, 67.

living water from Christ, and the worship of Jerusalem and Gerizim with the worship 'in Spirit and in truth'.²³⁶

In presenting the new order of worship, John draws on the prophetic promise of the new betrothal with the New Covenant.

John 2:1-11 The story of the wedding at Cana is unique to John's gospel, and it is the setting for the first sign. Barrett argues that it is not only the first sign, but the primary sign.²³⁷ McHugh underscores the significance of the wedding having such a prominent place in this gospel, at the beginning of Jesus' ministry.²³⁸ Van der Watt agrees, and asserts that it is to introduce Jesus as the eschatological Bridegroom.²³⁹

The wine ran out, and Jesus' mother requests that Jesus do something about it. The scene consists of four short conversations: first, between Jesus and his mother; second, between his mother and the servants; third, between Jesus and the servants; and fourth, between the master of the banquet and the bridegroom of the wedding.

The lack of wine at a wedding feast was a cause for social embarrassment.²⁴⁰ The provision of sufficient wine would have been the responsibility of the bridegroom. Jesus, by intervening with this miracle, is cast in the role of the bridegroom to provide ample wine for the guests.

His response to his mother's request to help out seems rather harsh, calling her 'Woman' rather than 'Mother'. Barrett argues this is not necessarily a demeaning term.²⁴¹ Feulliet points out that it could be understood as a distancing from his earthly family; Jesus was very clear about his identity, and began to express a separation from them, calling only God his Father.²⁴² His comment 'draws a sharp line between Jesus and his mother'.²⁴³

It is unclear what is meant by the statement, Jesus' time has not yet come. In other places, the phrase 'his time' refers to his Passion. But it is unlikely that the meaning is the same here at the beginning of his ministry. It could refer to his

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

²³⁷ C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to John*, London: SPCK, 1978 (2nd), 193.

²³⁸ McHugh, *John*, 191.

²³⁹ Van der Watt, *Family*, 393.

²⁴⁰ S.D. Toussaint, 'Significance of the First Sign in John's Gospel', *BSac* 134/533 (1977), 45-51, citing 50.

²⁴¹ Barrett, *John*, 191, 'There is no harshness or even disrespect in the vocative [gunai], as abundant examples, most significantly perhaps 19.26, show.'

²⁴² A. Feulliet, *Johannine Studies*, Staten Island: Alba House, 1964, 35.

²⁴³ Barrett, *John*, 191.

revealing his identity. But it is doubtful that his mother would accelerate or influence the timing of his self-disclosure.

However, his mother was completely confident of Jesus' action, instructing the servants to 'Do whatever he tells you.' Barrett notes the importance of the servants' response: 'Already prompt and complete obedience to his commands is required.'²⁴⁴

Jesus instructs the servants to fill up six stone jars used for purification—to fill them to the brim.²⁴⁵ This emphasizes the abundance, as well as the fulfilment of the Jewish purifications. The servants responded to Jesus' spoken word; the efficacy of Jesus' spoken word is introduced in this first sign.

The final verbal exchange is between the bridegroom and the master of the banquet, with the latter declaring, 'you have saved the best wine until now' (2:10). The wine here is symbolic of the New Covenant, a better Covenant, based in Jesus. Feulliet sees a correlation with the wedding wine and the wine given at the Last Supper, as symbolic of the New Covenant inaugurated by Jesus.²⁴⁶ Grassi argues that the transformation of the water into wine is symbolic of the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, a feast that celebrates covenant (Acts 2).²⁴⁷ While this may be possible, the point of the sign is that Jesus' disciples witnessed his glory and put their trust in him.

John 3:25-30 In this passage, the Baptist declares, 'He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. So this joy of mine has been made full. He must increase but I must decrease' (3:29f).

John the Baptist speaks this in response to his disciples' expression of concern that more people are following Jesus than him. While this could simply be a figure of speech to express the Baptist's own ministry in relationship to Jesus, it is more likely that he is continuing to be a witness of Jesus, by identifying him as the heavenly Bridegroom. The Baptist's testimony may be the earliest declaration of Jesus as the

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁵ A. Guida, 'From *parabolē* to *sēmeion*: The Nuptial Imagery in Mark and John', in E.S. Malbon (ed.), *Between Author & Audience in Mark*, Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2009, 103-120, citing 115. She notes that six is a number of incompleteness, and that Jesus is bringing fulfillment to Judaism. However, Barrett also notes the limitations of numerical interpretations and cannot be 'entirely satisfactory' because 'Jesus does not create a seventh vessel', *John*, 191; cf. Carson, *John*, 174.

²⁴⁶ Feulliet, *Johannine*, 31.

²⁴⁷ J.A. Grassi, 'The Wedding at Cana (John 2:1-11): A Pentecostal Meditation?', *NovT* 14/2 (1972), 131-136.

eschatological Bridegroom and bringer of the New Covenant. Batey notes that both in the synoptic tradition and in John, it is in interactions between the Baptist's disciples that this self-disclosure and identification takes place.²⁴⁸ He underscores the significance of these two separate traditions. John's job was to be a witness to the 'light'; it is not impossible that the Baptist instructed his disciples as to the identity of Jesus. Beasley-Murray, however, argues that it is merely a figure of speech in relation to his role in Jesus' ministry, even though the Baptist would have been aware of the prophetic usage of this metaphor.²⁴⁹

As the Baptist describes himself as a friend of the Bridegroom, he is metaphorically speaking of the *shoshebin*. Carson argues that in the ANE there is 'good evidence' that the best man is prohibited from taking the bride.²⁵⁰ Therefore John is stating that it would be inconceivable for him to be the one to take the Bride or be offended by the joy of the Bridegroom. The Bridegroom's arrival and assumption of his role is the fulfilment of John the Baptist's purpose.

Schnackenburg recalls the responsibility of the literal *shoshebin* at Jewish weddings and argues, that even though the Baptist is using a parable, it probably refers to 'the triumphal shout by which the bridegroom announced to his friends outside that he has been united to a virginal bride'.²⁵¹ Obviously, the Baptist cannot hear Jesus' voice at the moment, so it is a metaphor. Michaels comments that it is stretching the metaphor to the breaking point to try press the details of the metaphorical associations, with Jesus and his disciples, and consider John the Baptist as fulfilling the duties of a literal *shoshebin*.²⁵² However, he agrees with Schnackenburg that the Bride refers implicitly to Jesus' disciples and the believing community.²⁵³

We agree that the Baptist is identifying Jesus with Yahweh as the Bridegroom and that his followers are the Bride. Moreover, the Bride is also represented by the sheep who hear his voice. Michaels underscores the importance of being ones who hear Jesus' voice, as laid out in Chapter 10, especially.²⁵⁴

²⁴⁸ Batey, *Nuptial*, 50.

²⁴⁹ Beasley-Murray, *John*, 53.

²⁵⁰ Carson, *John*, 212.

²⁵¹ R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St John*, London: Burns & Oates, 1968, 1:416.

²⁵² Michaels, *John*, 220n38.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 219; Schnackenburg, *John*, 1:417.

²⁵⁴ Michaels, *John*, 219, (10:3-5, 16, 27; cf. 5:25, 28, 37; 18:37; 20:16).

McWhirter hears an echo of Jeremiah 33:11 in this passage, that John is referring to the prophecy of the return of ‘the voice of the bride and the voice of the groom’.²⁵⁵ However, this phrase, used four times in Jeremiah only, is not a messianic prophecy nor does it relate to the eschatological Bridegroom. Rather, it is indicative of the vitality of the community, as weddings were one of the great celebrations of village life. The absence of this mirth would indicate the cessation of a vibrant community, or specifically, the devastation of Jerusalem and Israel as prophesied in Jeremiah.²⁵⁶ Mann commented long ago, that this sound probably related to the commotion and din of the wedding guests and procession.²⁵⁷ The voice of the Bridegroom here relates to Jesus’ teaching and ministry, and his disciples response to him.

The sense of John’s proclamation, ‘He must increase, but I must decrease’, reflects the idea of a waxing and a waning in the ministries of the Forerunner and the eschatological Bridegroom.²⁵⁸ Lincoln points out, ‘Openness to the voice of the bridegroom himself is what counts now’.²⁵⁹ John embraced his role as the Forerunner and found joy in fulfilling his destiny.

John 4:1-42 In Chapter 4, we find another prominent example of nuptial imagery in the story of Jesus’ excursion through Samaria. His conversation with the woman at the well bears resemblance to a prototypical betrothal scene, such as found in Genesis 29:1-20.²⁶⁰ Lincoln rightly argues that the author of John intentionally uses this type of betrothal scene to indicate that Jesus, as the Bridegroom, is inaugurating the Covenant renewal, and new order of worship spoken of in the Prophets.²⁶¹ He calls attention to the

frequent depictions in the Jewish Scriptures of the covenant relationship between God and Israel in betrothal and marital terms, where Yahweh is husband or

²⁵⁵ McWhirter, *Bridegroom*, 50-58.

²⁵⁶ The imagery is used metaphorically in Jer. 7:34; 16:9; 25:10; 33:11, W. Brueggemann, *To Build, To Plant*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991, 96f; C. Meyers, ‘Bride (and Bridegroom)’ in C. Meyers (ed.), *Women in Scripture*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 324.

²⁵⁷ J. Mann, ‘Rabbinic Studies in the Synoptic Gospels: III – Marriage and Table Customs’, *HUCA* 1 (1924), 335-41, 336n40.

²⁵⁸ McHugh, *John*, 251.

²⁵⁹ Lincoln, *John*, 167.

²⁶⁰ See Lincoln, *John*, 170, for an explanation of the parallels between the betrothal scenes in Gen. 24:1-67, 29:1-4; Ex. 2:15-22. F.J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, Collegeville: Liturgical, 1998, 131n17, does not support the idea of a prototype betrothal scene in this passage.

²⁶¹ Lincoln, *John*, 170, 168-182.

bridegroom...Now Jesus, as the uniquely authorized representative of God is the bridegroom.²⁶²

McHugh asserts that Jesus has returned to claim ‘his long-lost bride’, the people of Samaria.²⁶³ He emphasizes that in the Old Testament and Judaism, ‘the bridegroom awaited at the end of time is always understood to be Yahweh, never the Messiah’; the followers of Jesus interpreted ‘his coming in the flesh’ as the ‘inauguration of the eschatological age’.²⁶⁴

The story has both a literal and symbolic value, especially regarding the nuptial imagery. Lincoln underscores the importance of understanding the metaphor of marriage as relationship with Yahweh in order to understand this passage.²⁶⁵

Jesus’ conversation with a Samaritan woman broke the cultural boundaries, but perhaps the woman symbolizes the entire people. Her marital history and current status as living immorally with a man she is not married to, have been seen as a metaphor of the idolatry of the Samaritans. Using the lens of the marriage metaphor, Lincoln views the encounter as exposing this idolatry of the people of Samaria; the five husbands relate to the five gods of Samaria.²⁶⁶ Others contradict this claim, based on 1 Kings 17:30f, but Lincoln cites other literature where the Samaritans considered their gods as five.²⁶⁷ Regardless of specific details and possibly overstretching the metaphoric associations, we agree that Jesus coming to Samaria as the Bridegroom is significant.

Within the context of this betrothal imagery, Jesus describes the new order of worship, ‘in spirit and in truth’ (4:23f). The stage has already been set for this in Chapter 3 where Jesus explains to Nicodemus that one must be born of the Spirit and of water in order to see the kingdom of God. Therefore, the ones who are able to worship the Father in Spirit and in truth are those who are born of the Spirit.²⁶⁸ Worship is no longer bound to a location, such as Jerusalem or Gerizim, but through the Spirit of God, with Jesus as the mediator. Jesus identified himself as the new temple in Chapter 2.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, 170.

²⁶³ McHugh, *John*, 267. Lincoln adds that in later Samaritan literature, they referred to themselves as Israelites. This elucidates a simple parallel with the promise of the remarriage of Israel and Judah (Hos. 1:11), *John*, 175.

²⁶⁴ McHugh, *John*, 250.

²⁶⁵ Lincoln, *John*, 170, 168-182.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 175.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁸ Michaels, *John*, 255. He also mentions that there are no longer only Jews and Gentiles, but a third race, a third people: Christians, who follow Jesus.

Michaels draws attention to Jesus' use of 'must' (4:24). Worshipping in Spirit and in truth is not optional; it is a 'must'.²⁶⁹ Barrett argues that the statement, of the Father seeking those who worship in Spirit and in truth, is perhaps as important as to the purpose of the gospel as laid out in 20:31—that you may believe.²⁷⁰

In this conversation, Jesus discloses that he indeed is the Messiah, and reinforces that salvation is from the Jews. Michaels notes that this is the only place where Jesus explicitly identifies himself with the Jews, and it is reminiscent of the other encounters with Gentiles in Mark.²⁷¹

Jesus expresses to his disciples that *now* is the time of the harvest, and this is realized in the immediate response of the Samaritan people.²⁷² Both the witness of the woman at the well and Jesus himself, enable the Samaritans to put their faith in him, calling Jesus, 'the Saviour of the World' (4:42).²⁷³ The betrothal scene concludes with the people of Samaria receiving Jesus as the Messiah.

John 4:46-54 The second sign, which forms the closing bracket of the *inclusio* of these three chapters, follows this scene. Back in Cana, an official requests Jesus to heal his son. Through faith in Jesus' spoken word, the father discovers the boy is healed. This miracle identifies Jesus as the giver of life, and possibly foreshadows his own death and resurrection. Both the first and second signs emphasize the efficiency of Jesus' spoken word.²⁷⁴ Thus, the *inclusio* of the two signs displays the new order of worship, inaugurated by Jesus, the eschatological Bridegroom and bringer of the New Covenant.

John 12:1-3; 20:1-18 McWhirter perceives echoes of Song of Songs in 12:1-3 and 20:1-18.²⁷⁵ She harkens back to Origen's allegorical interpretation of Song 1:12, where he related the fragrance of the Beloved's nard to Mary of Bethany's anointing of Jesus.²⁷⁶ Tait criticizes McWhirter, pointing out that the mentioning of nard 'belonged

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 254. He elucidates the idea of worship in spirit and in truth.

²⁷⁰ Barrett, *John*, 238; Michaels, *John*, 254.

²⁷¹ Michaels, *John*, 251.

²⁷² This contrasts with Chapter 2, where Jesus said his time had not yet come.

²⁷³ Beasley-Murray notes that this title was also claimed by the emperor of Rome and applied to other deities, so this declaration affirms that Jesus is the true Redeemer, *John*, 65.

²⁷⁴ Lincoln, *John*, 188.

²⁷⁵ McWhirter, *Bridegroom*, 79-105.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 86.

to the primitive tradition of the anointing before it passed into the Fourth Gospel'.²⁷⁷

Winter adds that 'the detected allusions remain too subtle to be convincing.'²⁷⁸

McWhirter further argues that Mary Magdalene's search for Jesus' body at the tomb resembles the Beloved's search for her Lover in Song 3:1-4.²⁷⁹ She emphasizes the similarity in the use of the word 'cling' in both passages, yet admits 'it is not at all clear why John uses the middle voice of [*ápto*] instead of duplicating the Song's verb [*krateo*]'.²⁸⁰ Again, Tait criticizes McWhirter, stating the author did not use the same word because it was, most likely, not his objective to allude to the Song of Songs.²⁸¹

These perceived allusions to the Song of Songs are more likely a later association than the author's intent. Schnackenburg comments that the Church Fathers' purpose was religious, not exegetical.²⁸² So even though McWhirter attempts to prove Origen's connections between the texts, they should be understood as secondary associations, not the author of John pointing to the Song.

John utilizes the prophetic model of the New Covenant in betrothal terms, presenting Jesus as the Bridegroom who brings the New Covenant to his people. The author does not associate Jesus with the Lover in Song of Songs. His purpose in employing the nuptial imagery is not to portray a messianic figure who is a bridegroom, but to display the Son of God who came to redeem his people and establish the New Covenant with his Bride.

The Synoptic Gospels

In the synoptic gospels, there are several pericopae that utilize the metaphor of marriage. Most of them are in parable form.

In the broadest sense parables can be understood as a type of metaphor, one thing spoken of in terms of another. The Church Fathers allegorized the parables liberally, coming up with creative versions that applied to their own situations. Scholarship in the last century sought to strip parables down to the sayings of the historical Jesus, and discover the original form and meaning.²⁸³ Other scholars move toward a polyvalent

²⁷⁷ Tait, *Jesus*, 203.

²⁷⁸ Winter, 'Review', 69.

²⁷⁹ McWhirter, *Bridegroom*, 88-105.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 103.

²⁸¹ Tait, *Jesus*, 204, especially n21.

²⁸² R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St John*, London: Burns & Oates, 1982, 1:197.

²⁸³ J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, London: SCM, 1963 (2nd).

approach, looking for multiple interpretations of the parables in various contexts or a reader response interpretation.²⁸⁴ Snodgrass points out there is value in looking for application of the parables and assigning meaning to them based on our own experience, but we will miss discovering the intention of Jesus' teaching if we do not seek to understand the original context. It is important to find a home for these parables within first century Judaism if we are to have any 'hope of finding the intent of Jesus'.²⁸⁵

In our study of the metaphor of Jesus the Bridegroom in the synoptic gospels, we will continue to consider the models that informed the writers in order to examine the use of this metaphor, and seek to understand the authors' intentions in using this metaphor.

Matthew 9:14-17; Mark 2:18-22; Luke 5:33-39 In all three versions of this pericope, the core elements remain the same: disciples of John or the Pharisees question Jesus regarding fasting, Jesus' self-identification as the Bridegroom, and the two parables of the wineskins and the patching up of the old garment. In all three accounts, the pericope is preceded by the stories of the healing of the paralytic and the call of Levi. After this, both Luke and Mark include the story of Jesus declaring that he is Lord of the Sabbath. But Matthew follows this passage with the story of the double healings of the woman with the issue of blood and the ruler's daughter.²⁸⁶

Jesus is questioned about his lack of fasting; he replies with another question, 'Can the sons of the bridal chamber fast while the bridegroom is with them?' It could refer to the general incompatibility of the mourning associated with fasting (Esth. 9:3; Joel 2:12) compared to the joy of the presence of Jesus.²⁸⁷

However, it is more likely a Christological reference.²⁸⁸ As we saw in the Old Testament, Husband/Bridegroom was a designation for Yahweh. The concept of a messianic bridegroom appeared later. Therefore, Tait contends that Jesus is not

²⁸⁴ M.A. Tolbert, *Perspectives on the Parables*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979.

²⁸⁵ K.R. Snodgrass, 'From Allegorizing to Allegorizing: A History of the Interpretation of the Parables of Jesus', in R.N. Longenecker (ed.), *The Challenge of Jesus' Parables*, Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2000, 3-29, citing 27.

²⁸⁶ Matthew leaves the ruler anonymous, while Mark, in his account, names him as Jarius, a ruler of the synagogue.

²⁸⁷ J. Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20*, Dallas: Word, 1989, 248. He does not see this as a specific 'self-designation'.

²⁸⁸ D.A. Carson, *Matthew Chapters 1 through 12*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995, 227.

referring to the joy of his presence but this allusion to the Bridegroom is a veiled reference to his divinity.²⁸⁹ Blomberg maintains that Jesus transfers the metaphoric title of Bridegroom to himself.²⁹⁰

The type of fasting in question was most probably not the required Day of Atonement fast but the voluntary fasts observed by the Pharisees; the disciples of John would have fasted as a part of their ascetic lifestyle.²⁹¹

Jesus' prediction of fasting after his removal probably refers to the actual time of his Passion. Luke seems to point to the immediate time of Jesus' removal, contrasted with the joy of his resurrection and Pentecost, while Mark probably intends fasting beyond the passion period.²⁹² In Matthew 6:16-18, the Evangelist describes Jesus as teaching 'when you fast'. But it would not be fasting in the same manner as the Pharisees, for at least by the presence of the Holy Spirit, we have fellowship with Jesus, though we still long for the fullness of his kingdom.²⁹³ In Acts, prayer and fasting are employed to seek the Lord for guidance and protection (13:3, 14:23).

The subsequent two parables dramatize the incompatibility of the new with the old. Although it is possible that the parables have to do with the discipline of fasting, a general application to the ministry of Jesus is more probable.

The first parable of the patch on the old garment is slightly different in all three gospels; Mark and Matthew express the ludicrousness of using an unshrunk piece of cloth to patch up an old garment, while Luke relays the improbability of tearing a piece of a new garment to repair an old one. However, it could be that 'the high value set on the old may indeed lead to inappropriate attempts to preserve it.'²⁹⁴ It is not necessarily a rejection of the old, or any particular elements, but rather, to illustrate that the new ministry of Jesus 'must be allowed to have its own integrity'.²⁹⁵

The new wine is the wine of the New Covenant, and it needs room to expand. New wineskins have the flexibility to accommodate the fermenting new wine. Matthew writes that that new wine must be put into new wineskins, and both will be

²⁸⁹ Tait, *Jesus*, 28, *passim*.

²⁹⁰ C.L. Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels*, Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1997, 237.

²⁹¹ According to *Did.* 8:1, Mondays and Thursdays were their days of fasting, cited in R.A. Guelich, *Mark 1-8:26*, Dallas: Word, 1989, 109.

²⁹² Nolland, *Luke*, 248. Cf. Guelich, *Mark*, 109-114.

²⁹³ I.H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, Exeter: Paternoster, 1978, 226. *Did.* 8:1 states that Wednesday and Fridays were regular fasting days for that church, U. Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001, 37.

²⁹⁴ Nolland, *Luke*, 249.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

preserved. It seems that the natural understanding of this verse is that both the new wine and the new wineskins will be preserved.²⁹⁶ But Davies and Allison emphasize, that in light of Matthew's explanation in 5:17-20, the Evangelist portrays Jesus as fulfilling, not replacing the old. 'The past is not to be forsaken...For Matthew Judaism is Christianity's inheritance, and it would be unthinkable to abandon the legacy.'²⁹⁷

Luke adds a comment that no one, after drinking the old wine, wants the new, for they say that the old is 'good' or 'better' (5:39). While there are new possibilities with the new wine, some disregard it as *merely* new wine, with a different perspective. But Luke is not clear with his exact intentions in using this phrase.²⁹⁸ The focus of the parables is on the new and not exactly what to do with the old.

The work of the New Covenant indeed is a new work, and must have room to expand with its own integrity.

Matthew 22:1-14 The parable of the Wedding Feast is set amongst other parables spoken to the chief priests and religious leaders.²⁹⁹ It follows the Parables of the Two Sons and the Wicked Tenants; both of them contrast those who obey God with those who disobey.

In opening statement of the parable, 'The kingdom of heaven is like a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son', Jesus refers to himself as the son of the king, who is obviously God. It is a stock metaphor that the audience would have readily understood.³⁰⁰ This declaration affirms his relationship to God.

Luz argues that a wedding feast was not the traditional understanding of the eschatological banquet. He attributes this development to the Early Church, rather than interpreting it as Jesus' own parable. 'The idea of Israel as God's bride seldom has an eschatological accent in Jewish tradition', and he argues that the readers would not have the background of the wedding feast as the eschatological banquet.³⁰¹ But the

²⁹⁶ D.A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, Dallas: Word, 1993, 244.

²⁹⁷ W.D. Davies and D.C. Allison, Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988, 2:112. R.T. France disagrees that this text has any suggestion to 'a continuing role for the Jewish tradition alongside the new wine of the kingdom of heaven', *The Gospel of Matthew*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007, 357n32.

²⁹⁸ Nolland, *Luke*, 250.

²⁹⁹ Similar banquet parables are found in Luke 14 and the Gospel of Thomas 64. For a detailed comparison, see K.L. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002, 305; cf. Luz, *Matthew 21-28*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005, 47 for a different interpretation.

³⁰⁰ C.L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, Leicester: IVP, 1990, 37.

³⁰¹ Luz, *Matthew 21-28*, 52.

New Covenant is in the language of betrothal from the original prophetic declarations (Hos. 2:19). Especially in Jeremiah 31, an abundance of wine, grain, and oil is promised with the restoration of the relationship with Israel and the New Covenant. Long argues convincingly that it was Jesus who combined the wedding motif with the eschatological feast.³⁰² Jesus, as the eschatological Bridegroom, identified the upcoming age of plenty with the promised betrothal of God to his people forever.³⁰³

The invited guests' excuses reflect regular worldly pursuits that, in and of themselves, were not sinful.³⁰⁴ The parable reminds us that even the good things can distract us from the purposes of God. The invitation to the wedding feast requires an abandonment of all other pursuits, even when it seems difficult or appears to us as inconvenient to come. We must respond at the appropriate time to God's call, and be prepared to move on his terms.

A wedding was a very important affair, and to decline an invitation from a king could be construed as treason, not just a snub. This could possibly justify or explain the military action that takes place in Matthew's parable. It perhaps is a literary formula for 'punitive expeditions' in the ancient world.³⁰⁵ Historically, this military action could refer to the Babylonian invasion in 586 BCE where the complete city was destroyed. Or it could be a prophecy of the Roman devastation in 70 CE, even though only the Temple was destroyed.³⁰⁶ But Hagner comments that after 70 CE, it would be obvious to read it as the fall of Jerusalem.³⁰⁷

Throughout Church history, the interpretation of rejection of the Jews and replacement of the Gentiles as wedding guests has been prominent.³⁰⁸ Through this lens, the parable appears very anti-Semitic. However, within the context of the parable, if we think of Jesus as speaking it, it is not about the Gentiles taking the place of the Jews. Snodgrass comments

The tendency of both scholars and pastors to interpret these parables as showing rejection of Israel or her displacement by the church must itself be rejected. The

³⁰² Long, *Bridegroom*, 218.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, 239.

³⁰⁴ Blomberg, *Interpreting*, 234. He points out that the excuses are similar to ones listed in Deut. 20:5-9 as reasons for exemption from participating in military duty.

³⁰⁵ Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, Waco: Word, 1995, 628.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 630.

³⁰⁸ Hagner sees this third parable as relating the Jewish people generally and not just the religious leaders of the day, *ibid.*, 632; cf. Luz, *Matthew 21-28*, 52-54.

problem of anti-Semitism has to be faced with other texts, but it should not be laid on these parables.³⁰⁹

There is no reference to a Gentile mission.³¹⁰ Instead, Jesus is criticizing the unbelief and hypocrisy of the religious leaders, and welcoming those who responded to his invitation, even if they were the outcasts of society. This understanding follows the dynamic in Jesus' ministry to dine with the outcasts of society such as the tax collectors and prostitutes. In this view, they would be at the banquet but the leaders would not.

So though some people declined the invitation, others responded positively. The invitation remains open to all.

In verses 10-13, the wedding guest without the appropriate wedding garment is cast out, not merely of the wedding banquet, but into eschatological judgment.³¹¹ The garment has been considered to be baptism, good works, love, and other things.³¹² It probably relates to righteous living that is advocated prominently in this gospel. The proposition of wedding garments be distributed to the guests to wear at the feast is 'difficult to substantiate',³¹³ but people were to wear clean clothes, the best of whatever they had, in order to show respect for the host.³¹⁴

Verse 14, 'Many are called but few are chosen' may be a Semitic proverb, meaning 'everyone' is called but 'fewer than', in the sense of 'not all', are chosen.³¹⁵ It is a Matthean conclusion to the parables; it 'demonstrates both divine grace and human responsibility'.³¹⁶

³⁰⁹Snodgrass, *Stories*, 321. *Contra* Luz, who argues that this parable relates to a 'judgment within history. It brings to a close a long epoch of God's approach to Israel...the story of God's approach has ended for Israel as a whole', *Matthew 21-28*, 54.

³¹⁰Blomberg, *Interpreting*, 234, 'There is nothing in the parable's imagery to suggest that any non-Israelites are in view.' However, A.W. Martens views the invitation to those on the roads 'going out of the city into the pagan world' as extending 'out into the environs of the Gentiles', "'Produce Fruit Worthy of Repentance": Parables of Judgment against the Jewish Religious Leaders and the Nation', in R.N. Longenecker (ed.), *The Challenge of Jesus' Parables*, Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2000, 151-176, citing 165.

³¹¹Hagner notes the interweaving of the storyline with the evident eschatological elements. The formula of 'outer darkness' and 'weeping and gnashing of teeth' is used elsewhere in this gospel (8:12; 13:42, 50; 24:51; 25:30), *Matthew 14-28*, 631.

³¹²Luz, *Matthew 21-28*, 58. See 57-59 for an overview of the history of interpretation of this parable, specifically the wedding garment.

³¹³Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, 631. Cf. Blomberg, *Interpreting*, 238.

³¹⁴Luz, *Matthew 21-28*, 58.

³¹⁵Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, 632.

³¹⁶Snodgrass, *Stories*, 321.

There are overtones of responsibility, readiness, and the renouncing of worldly pursuits in order to be well prepared for the future wedding feast. Hagner emphasizes that the call to discipleship and living righteously according to the kingdom demands are the only ‘demonstrating criterion’ for ‘membership among the elect’.³¹⁷

This carries over into our next parable, the Ten Virgins.

Matthew 25:1-13 The parable of the Ten Virgins lies in the middle of Jesus’ eschatological discourse.³¹⁸ The previous parable is the Thief in the Night; the following parable is the Ten Talents. Matthew also records Jesus’ prophecy of the final judgment and his return.

The introductory line of the parable incorporates the future tense to indicate the eschatological element of this story. ‘The kingdom of heaven shall be like ten virgins³¹⁹ who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom.’³²⁰ Some early manuscripts include, ‘and the bride’. Bailey argues the longer reading more clearly reflects the wedding practices of the culture. He contends that the Early Church ‘copyists were influenced by the idea that “the church is the bride of Christ” and so Jesus, the bridegroom, *comes* to his bride’ and therefore omitted it.³²¹ Whether it was a copyist’s inclusion or exclusion based on their knowledge of wedding customs, or the author’s intention, it should not detract us from the main point of the parable, which is readiness for the *parousia*.

The girls were probably the bride’s attendants, but it is unclear where they were waiting. The actual place of the girls is ‘hardly crucial’ to the understanding of the parable,³²² despite much scholarly debate about details that cannot be shown. As we have already noted, very little is known about the actual wedding customs of the first century Israel. Therefore, Argyle argues that this parable could reflect actual practice, and that it is unnecessary to regard the activities in this story as mere allegory.³²³

³¹⁷ Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, 632.

³¹⁸ K.E. Bailey examines the parallels with the parable in Luke 12:35-38 of the Watching Servants, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, London: SPCK, 2008, 269-271.

³¹⁹ Jeremias, *Parables*, 174, argues that ‘the kingdom of God is not compared to the virgins but to the wedding.’

³²⁰ *Did.* 16:1 has a similar saying, Snodgrass, *Stories*, 507. See Luz, *Matthew 21-28*, 235-244, for an overview of the history of interpretation of this parable.

³²¹ Bailey, *Jesus*, 271.

³²² Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, 728.

³²³ Argyle, ‘Wedding’, 215.

The more important point is the comparison between the wise and the foolish. The foolish girls took their lamps, but they did not take oil with them. The wise girls did bring extra oil, and were thus prepared for a delay. A similar comparison is found in Matthew 7:24-26. Both pericopae utilize the future tense, ‘shall be like’ to describe the kingdom of God.³²⁴ In the passage at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, those who are wise ‘put into practice’ the teachings of Jesus, while the foolish do not. The wise virgins most likely represent those who not only hear the words of Jesus but act accordingly.

Because of the strong allegorical features of this parable, scholars such as Donfried continue argue that it is indeed an allegory, proposing a one-to-one correspondence with the various elements.³²⁵ He argues that the oil is the ‘interpretive key’ to the gospel, and that it symbolizes good works.³²⁶

Blomberg emphasizes, however, that while it is easier to assume the parable is an allegory from its inception, it is more accurate to limit the allegorical elements to the characters: the bridegroom who represents Jesus, and the virgins who symbolize the two groups of the believing community who will either be prepared or unready at Judgment Day.³²⁷ He argues that the ‘incident with the oil’ should be interpreted ‘in the broadest possible sense of anything which an individual must do to be ready to meet the Lord’.³²⁸ Because oil in the Old Testament often symbolizes joy, or has the specific use of anointing of a priest, scholars have attempted to assign specific meanings such as faith, good works, love, or the Holy Spirit.

Putting Jesus’ teaching into practice is part of the necessary preparation to meet the Lord. Good works, in and of themselves, are not what is required, but obedience that comes from a response to the Lord’s love for us. ‘If you love me, you will obey my commands’ (John 14:15).

The ‘nodding off’ of the ten girls does not constitute being unprepared. Both the wise and the foolish fall asleep. But the prudent foresight of the wise to prepare for a

³²⁴ A.J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000, 172. The future tense, ‘shall be like’, *homoiōthēsetai*, is used only in these two verses in the New Testament. The kingdom shall be like the wedding and the consummation, not the virgins. Cf. Snodgrass, *Stories*, 509.

³²⁵ K.P. Donfried, ‘The Allegory of the Ten Virgins (Matt. 25:1-13) as a Summary of Matthean Theology’, *JBL* 93 (1974), 415-28.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*, 423, 428.

³²⁷ Blomberg, *Interpreting*, 195.

³²⁸ *Ibid.*, 196.

delay reflects their wisdom. When the bridegroom does come, the girls trim their lamps to make them shine more brightly.

The foolish girls realize they need more oil, as their lamps are going out. In Job 18:5 and Proverbs 13:9 we find similar imagery of the lamps of the wicked going out.³²⁹ While the wise girls withholding their own supply for themselves may appear selfish, this is not a teaching on the violation of Christian ethics.³³⁰ Instead it reinforces the importance of forethought in preparedness. Certain things cannot be borrowed, like discipleship and faithfulness; these qualities must be secured by each believer.³³¹ It is also a warning to prepare for the long haul.

The bridegroom arrives while the foolish are procuring their oil, and only the virgins who are ready and waiting are admitted to the wedding. By the time the foolish girls finally do return, the door has been locked, and they are shut out. The bridegroom's responds, 'I do not know you!' Perhaps this statement also points to the reality of knowing God, which the Prophets repeatedly charged the people. Putting Jesus' teachings into practice leads to the knowledge of him. His harsh rejection of the unprepared also echoes Matthew 7:21-22. There he prophesies the rejection those who merely did signs and wonders in his name, stating 'Depart from me, I never knew you!' Perhaps Jesus is indicating a superficial knowledge of him is inadequate; rather, a sincere response of wise living leads to a more intimate knowledge of him and being known by him.

Verse 13 closes the parable with the exhortation to 'Watch!' It refers to spiritual watchfulness, not literal sleep, to be ready for the Son of Man whenever he comes.³³² Snodgrass argues, 'Wisdom is eschatologically defined.'³³³ Davies and Allison comment, 'The foolish virgins, who stand for unfaithful disciples, reveal that religious failure will suffer eschatological punishment.'³³⁴

³²⁹ Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, 729.

³³⁰ R.T. France, 'On Being Ready, Matthew 25:1-46', in R.N. Longenecker (ed.), *The Challenge of Jesus' Parables*, Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2000, 182.

³³¹ Bailey, *Jesus*, 274.

³³² Similar warnings are found in Matt. 24:42; Mark 13:35-37; Luke 12:35-38.

³³³ Snodgrass, *Stories*, 518.

³³⁴ W.D. Davies and D.C. Allison, Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997, 3:392.

Snodgrass points out that the required readiness is not delineated in this parable, but the next two parables ‘spell out’ what is required, that is, being faithful to use the gifts we have been given for the kingdom, and serve others as Jesus did.³³⁵

Matthew 12:38-39; 16:1-4; Mark 8:34-38 In addition to the nuptial imagery in Matthew and Mark, we also find references to the issue of spiritual adultery.

In Matthew 12:38-39 and 16:1-4, Jesus is asked for further signs to demonstrate his authenticity. Davies and Allison argue that the Pharisees and others were looking for some kind of definitive sign from heaven, ‘an unambiguous, eschatological sign, one so dramatic or cosmic in scope as to preclude the need for interpretation’.³³⁶ Jesus calls those who are asking for additional proof ‘an adulterous generation’.³³⁷ Jesus uses the metaphor to speak of covenantal unfaithfulness. He reorients this metaphor, which is associated with Yahweh in the prophetic tradition, to himself and the acceptance of his own ministry. While the Prophets used this metaphor to describe covenantal violations of worship of other gods and political alliances, the adultery indicated here is opposition to ‘God’s purpose as it is now focused in the ministry of Jesus’.³³⁸ Adultery is broadly construed as the general skepticism of the people.³³⁹

In Mark 8:11-12, we also find a parallel story of a request for a sign, but it is not until later in the chapter that the phrase ‘adulterous generation’ appears. Mark includes it in the context of discipleship. In this passage, 8:34-38, Jesus defines the cost of following him.

‘What Jesus calls for here is thus a radical abandonment of one’s own identity and self-determination’.³⁴⁰ It is to ‘refuse to be guided by one’s own interests, to surrender control of one’s own destiny’.³⁴¹ Best argues that Jesus’ call to discipleship ‘is not the denial of something to the self, but the denial of the self itself’.³⁴² It is more than giving up something for Lent.³⁴³

³³⁵ Snodgrass, *Stories*, 518.

³³⁶ W.D. Davies and D.C. Allison, Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991, 2:580.

³³⁷ *Ibid.*, 2:355. In the Luke 12:29-32 parallel, the word adulterous is not used, because the Gentile readers possibly would not have understood the metaphor.

³³⁸ France, *Matthew*, 489.

³³⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁰ R.T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002, 340.

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*

³⁴² E. Best, *Following Jesus*, Sheffield: JSOT, 1981, 37.

³⁴³ France, *Mark*, 340.

Jesus warns his disciples not to be ashamed of him in this ‘adulterous generation’, less they risk Jesus being ashamed of them when he ‘comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels’ (8:38).

This is a stern exhortation to completely identify with Christ and lay aside our own limitations and quest for approval of others. We are called to imitate Christ in all that we say and do, to proclaim his words, and serve him in this current ‘adulterous generation’. If we are ashamed of him here, we must consider the Jesus’ warning of his being ashamed of us in the ‘eternal sphere’.³⁴⁴

Although Jesus was speaking to his generation, the metaphor carries over to the present day generation, implying those who do not believe him, or who do not take up their cross and follow Jesus with abandonment, are also an ‘adulterous generation’. This reality must awaken us to the urgency of the call to deny ourselves in the here and now, to live unashamedly for Jesus and spread the gospel of the kingdom.

Spiritual adultery in Matthew referred to the unbelief of the Jews. But in Mark’s gospel, it is set in the midst of cost of discipleship. We suggest that spiritual adultery, in this context, also includes being ashamed Jesus in this generation. Possibly it may mean anything less than total denial of self. But now the metaphor points to Jesus; he, as the inaugurator of the New Covenant, is the one who requires absolute loyalty and faithfulness.

James

There are very few internal clues as to the author, setting, and date of the Epistle of James. James is a very common Jewish name, and could refer to any leader in the Church or prophet. However, the author of the Epistle has traditionally been taken to be James the brother of Jesus, leader of the Church in Jerusalem.

The strong exhortations to works and justice led Luther to call it an ‘epistle of straw’.³⁴⁵ The epistle bears a resemblance to the prophetic oracles in the Old Testament.³⁴⁶ It has been debated if James was written as a Jewish book or a Christian book, due to the minimal mention of the name of Jesus. Only in his introduction as ‘a servant of Jesus Christ’ do we see a specific reference. However, it is likely that it is

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 342.

³⁴⁵ Cited in M.J. Kamell, ‘Incarnating Jeremiah’s Promised New Covenant in the ‘Law’ of James’, *EvQ* 83/1 (2011), 19-28, citing 19.

³⁴⁶ R.P. Martin, *James*, Waco: Word, 1988, 156.

one of the earliest books in the New Testament, possibly written before the widespread inclusion of Gentiles, or perhaps specifically to Jewish believers, as the greeting to the ‘Twelve Tribes in the Diaspora’ indicates.

Throughout the epistle, there is a strong call to putting our faith into practice, by living in obedience to ‘the implanted word’ (James 1:21). Kamell argues that James’ language points to an early articulation of the New Covenant: the Law or instruction of God written on our hearts.³⁴⁷ While James’ exhortations may appear to be Law focused, it is relevant to consider that he contended for obedience to the internal ‘law of liberty’ imparted by the Holy Spirit, not a reliance on the Law (James 1:25; 2:12).

We find a very explicit reference to the marriage metaphor in Chapter 4. It is ‘one of the most strongly worded calls’³⁴⁸ to repentance in the New Testament. While James has been exhorting the brothers, calling them even ‘dear brothers’, he suddenly proclaims the accusation against them of ‘You adulteresses! Don’t you know that friendship with the world is enmity towards God?’ The charge, ‘adulteresses’, does not refer to women in the Church who are being unfaithful to their husbands.³⁴⁹ Rather, it evokes the metaphor of covenantal unfaithfulness with which they were well familiar.³⁵⁰ The brothers quarrelling, and possibly even murdering to get their desires met, provoked James to make this indictment against them.³⁵¹

Ortland notes the shift from the Old Testament employment of this metaphor for Israel or Judah in a national manner, to James’ indictment at the individual level.³⁵² James uses this epithet to shock and awaken them to the gravity of their sin. Furthermore, it is not a matter of fidelity to the Christian confession; the text gives no

³⁴⁷ Kamel, ‘Incarnating’, 25.

³⁴⁸ D.J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000, 186.

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.* D.C. Allison argues there could be an aspect of sexual love as well, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary of the Epistle of James*, London: T&T Clark, 2013, 609.

³⁵⁰ C.L. Blomberg and M.J. Kamell, *James*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008, 189. ‘James personifies the entire church as the “bride” of Yahweh or Christ. At best she has become distracted from and at worst, unfaithful to her groom.’ Allison makes a strong charge, ‘In James the term designates forsaking God to take the world as a paramour,’ *James*, 607. J.J. Schmitt takes a different point of view, and does not see a connection with divine marriage, ‘You Adulteresses! The Image in James 4:4’, *NovT*, 28/4 (1986), 327-337. Rather, he sees the image of an adulteress in Prov. 30:20 as the inspiration for the author of James, 336f.

³⁵¹ Martin argues that the murdering was literal, done by Zealot believers who still adhered to the old ways, *James*, 146. While it is possible to consider it in a spiritual way, as in Matt. 5:21-26, Moo takes it to be hypothetical murdering—the quarreling could lead to murdering if not stopped, *James*, 184.

³⁵² Ortland, *Whoredom*, 140n4. M. Dibelius argues that Philo, *Cher.* 50, already used bridal imagery for the individual soul, and that indicates an already established understanding of the individual application of the metaphor, *James*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976, 220n69.

indication that it was that believers were denying Christ.³⁵³ Rather, it is the lack of evidence of that confession's effect in their lives. Their behaviour indicated that their allegiance was elsewhere; they were not completely devoted to Christ.

Friendship in the ANE was not as casual as we experience today; it was more holistic. In antiquity, friendship would be 'a lifelong pact between people with shared values and loyalties'.³⁵⁴ Therefore, to be a friend of the world was not the mere association with worldly ways, but identification with the ways of the world. To set oneself up as a friend of the world would incur the judgment of God.³⁵⁵ This charge and call to repentance is the heart of the epistle. It sums up what James argues throughout the letter. The New Covenant requires a demonstration of God's 'instruction' in our lives.

Verse 5 is 'one of the most difficult verses' to translate in the New Testament.³⁵⁶ The variances in the major modern translations reflect that challenge.³⁵⁷ One reason for this difficulty is that it is unclear what scripture James is referring to, and secondly, and more importantly, the referents for 'spirit', 'jealousy', and the verb, 'desire, yearn', are unclear in the Greek. However, we agree with Moo, that

James's striking application of the OT imagery of God as the spouse of his people in v.4 is the key to understanding this verse. Verse 5 explains why flirtation with the world is so serious a matter by bringing to mind the jealousy of the Lord, which demands total, unreserved, unwavering allegiance from the people with whom he has joined himself.³⁵⁸

First of all, James' use of the term 'scripture' does not refer to a specific saying in a lost non-canonical book, but rather, to the very clear theme of jealousy that is present in the Old Testament.³⁵⁹

The jealousy referred to is not human jealousy or envy, but divine jealousy. It is God who yearns for us. It is not the negative yearning of envy or jealousy in the human spirit. However, some argue that because James accuses the believers of abounding with negative human jealousy and envy earlier in the letter, we should consider that

³⁵³ Moo, *James*, 187.

³⁵⁴ Blomberg and Kamell, *James*, 190. They argue that the theme of the letter is 'the contrast between friendship with the world and God.'

³⁵⁵ Moo, *James*, 187.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 188.

³⁵⁷ See Allison, *James*, 610-622, for a comprehensive treatment of various possibilities of translating this verse, and the spectrum of biblical translations in print.

³⁵⁸ Moo, *James*, 188.

³⁵⁹ Martin, *James*, 149f; Moo, *James*, 191.

James is using jealousy in the same way.³⁶⁰ But the immediate context is that of spiritual adultery, and most likely, it refers to divine jealousy, in keeping with that theme.³⁶¹

The term ‘spirit’ could mean the ‘Holy Spirit’. With this understanding, God is the one who is yearning for *his* Spirit that he has placed in us. This would carry through with the theme from Pentecost and contains the idea that God’s jealousy relates to the presence of the Holy Spirit in us as believers.³⁶² Or it could refer to the human spirit that God has placed in humans, and he is longing for his people to respond to him.

Despite the numerous possibilities reflected amongst scholars and translations, we still contend that the most reasonable rendering of this verse is in conjunction with the immediate context of ‘adulteresses’ and the metaphor of covenantal faithfulness in marriage. Unless we consider and incorporate the influence of this metaphor on the initial Hebrew Christian readers, we overlook the translation key. God is jealous for his people.

How one interprets verse 6, depends on the understanding of verse 5. James writes, ‘But God gives greater grace.’ Does this refer to the grace to overcome the tendency towards envy within us? Or if we understand verse 5 within the context of God’s jealousy towards us, then, as Carson states, ‘the flow reads: God’s longing for us is driven by his own holy jealousy, but God is as gracious as he is holy, and he supplies us with all the grace we need to meet his own holy demand.’³⁶³ Augustine writes, ‘God gives what he demands.’³⁶⁴

Blevins draws parallels with Hosea’s relationship with Gomer. ‘This prophet used Gomer’s unfaithfulness as an opportunity for grace and forgiveness rather than as a cause for divorce.’³⁶⁵ He argues that just as in marital infidelity, the extramarital affair has to be terminated in order to restore the marriage. He sees the call to repentance as the means for unfaithful Christians to ‘terminate an affair with the world

³⁶⁰ Martin, *James*, 149-151. Martin argues that it refers to the Holy Spirit within us, yet it is the Holy Spirit that opposes the human envy at work in our carnal ways.

³⁶¹ D.A. Carson, ‘James’, in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, G.K. Beale and D.A. Carson (eds.), Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007, 997-1013, citing 1007.

³⁶² H. Alford cited in Allison, *James*, 613n142.

³⁶³ Carson, ‘James’, 1008.

³⁶⁴ Cited in Moo, *James*, 191.

³⁶⁵ W.L. Blevins, ‘A Call to Repent, Love Others, and Remember God: James 4’, *RevExp* 83 (1986), 419-426, citing 422.

and renew a close relationship with God'.³⁶⁶ The imperatives in verses 6-10 provide 'an expanded definition of repentance'.³⁶⁷

James shows us that the way to apprehend God's grace is through humility. Quoting Proverbs 3:34, we read that 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble'.³⁶⁸ The proper response is humility. Spiritual adultery is no minor offense; James calls the people to repentance in no uncertain terms. First of all, we must submit to God and forsake friendship with the world. Submission to God 'means to place ourselves under his lordship, and therefore, to commit ourselves to obey him in all things'.³⁶⁹ When we are under the Lord's authority, we are not under the devil's authority; therefore, we can resist the devil's influence and control. The promise of God's drawing near to us as we draw near to him is a promise of restoration for Christians, not for the salvation of unbelievers.

However, drawing near requires a demonstration of repentance. James calls the unfaithful to an external demonstration of repentance, as well as an internal change. He calls those who are double minded (literally, 'double-souled')³⁷⁰ to purify their hearts and to wash their hands.³⁷¹ Coupled with this response is the call to traditional Old Testament style repentance, of grieving, mourning, and wailing. Indeed, James stands 'in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets'³⁷² in calling his readers to 'an overt and explicit repentance'.³⁷³ As is throughout James, words are not enough, but a demonstration of faith is required. 'He is calling his readers to a radical repentance-conversion that orientates the whole person to God and his ways in this world.'³⁷⁴

Moo reminds us that

[E]ven the committed Christian can slip into a casual attitude toward sin, perhaps presuming too much on God's forgiving and merciful nature. James's words in this passage directly counter any such attitude. He wants us to see sin for what it is – a serious breach in our relationship with [God], a breach that, if not healed, can lead to both temporal and spiritual disaster.³⁷⁵

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁸ Cf. 1 Pet 5:5f.

³⁶⁹ Moo, *James*, 192.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 194.

³⁷¹ Martin comments on the call to cultic purity in this passage, *James*, 153.

³⁷² *Ibid.*, 156.

³⁷³ *Ibid.*, 154.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 153.

³⁷⁵ Moo, *James*, 195.

Spiritual harlotry is an issue for Christians today. It is possible for men and women alike to be ‘adulteresses’ in their relationship with God. James underscores the need for covenantal faithfulness within the New Covenant. Friendship with the world, in all its subtle forms, still puts us at enmity with God.³⁷⁶ Each person ‘is bidden to search himself for the adultery of desiring friendship with the world’.³⁷⁷

James again exhorts his readers to humility, ‘Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you’ (4:10). This thought is prevalent in Jewish rabbinic teaching and echoed in other areas of the New Testament.³⁷⁸ This concept probably became a ‘popular motto in the early church’.³⁷⁹ Martin calls humility the ‘state of total dependence on God’,³⁸⁰ which is in stark contrast to friendship with the world and reliance on its ways. Humility is the way of joy for the Christian.

Here in James we find the one of the clearest calls to covenantal fidelity within the New Testament. No longer is spiritual adultery to be considered as a national sin, but the local community, and more likely, every individual, is now responsible to demonstrate allegiance to Jesus through his or her behaviour. God does give greater grace to believers, but we are to walk in humility in response to this grace.

Paul

In the Pauline epistles, we find explicit references to the metaphor of Jesus the Bridegroom in 2 Corinthians 11:2f and Ephesians 5:21-33.³⁸¹ Paul uses this metaphor to express the believers’ union with Christ and the fidelity required in the New Covenant. In addition, 1 Corinthians 6:15-20 has a reference to the ‘one flesh’ union which is also found in Ephesians 5:31.

1 Corinthians 6:15-20 In 1 Corinthians 6, we see Paul’s use of the ‘one flesh’ argument. It is not a parenthesis on marriage, but an instruction that a believer’s body belongs to the Lord. We are not to consider our bodies to be unimportant, for Christ has redeemed our bodies, and we belong to him in totality. Here Paul is arguing

³⁷⁶ Martin, *James*, 157.

³⁷⁷ Ortland, *Whoredom*, 140.

³⁷⁸ Martin, *James*, 155.

³⁷⁹ Moo, *James*, 196, citing 2 Cor. 11:7; 1 Pet. 5:6; cf. Jesus’ teaching in Luke 18:14; 14:11; Matt. 23:12.

³⁸⁰ Martin, *James*, 155.

³⁸¹ Batey argues that neither Rom. 7:1-6 or Gal. 4:21-33 are related to the marriage metaphor, *Nuptial*, 17-19.

against sexual relations with a prostitute, stating that in having a ‘one flesh’ relationship with the prostitute, the believer is joining his body, who belongs to Christ, to a prostitute. Paul likens our spiritual union with Christ to the one flesh relationship of human marriage. Fee states

The body of the believer is *for* the Lord because through Christ’s resurrection God has set in motion the reality of our own resurrection. This means that the believer’s physical body is to be understood as ‘joined’ to Christ’s own ‘body’ that was raised from the dead.³⁸²

Paul’s primary concern in this argument is the relationship of Christ and the believer, and how the sexual immorality violates that relationship.³⁸³

We are members of Christ’s body. Paul uses this metaphor again in Chapter 12, but in a different manner. In that passage, verses 12-26, he refers to the relationship of members one to another; but in Chapter 6, the metaphor is used for the individual believers’ relationship to the Lord.

Sampley highlights parallel verses in Sirach: 19:2 warns of joining to a prostitute, ‘The man who cleaves to a prostitute is reckless’; in 2:3 the command is to ‘Cleave to the Lord’. He postulates that Paul could have been influenced by this tradition.³⁸⁴ It is a possibility, but Paul’s argument takes it beyond recklessness into outright defilement of the temple of the God, portrayed as the individual believer’s body.

We are called the temples of the Holy Spirit (6:19). Earlier, this title is used of the corporate Church; the congregation in Corinth is considered to be the temple (3:16). But in 6:19, Paul ascribes this reality to each believer, that each one is a temple. He affirms the sanctity of the body as a dwelling place for Christ.³⁸⁵ We are, as a whole person, for Christ. This metaphor affirms the importance of the whole body, but we are not merely an encasing of the Holy Spirit.³⁸⁶ Rather, ‘our physical bodies are mystically, by the Holy Spirit, united to Christ...[and we are] *one with him in spirit*’.³⁸⁷ Furthermore, this passage seems to introduce that an individual believer, not just the whole community, is considered as ‘wed’ to Christ.

³⁸² G.D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987, 258.

³⁸³ D.E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007, 234.

³⁸⁴ J. Sampley, *And the Two Shall Become One Flesh*, Cambridge: CUP, 1971, 79.

³⁸⁵ A.C. Thiselton, *First Corinthians*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006, 96f; cf. A.F. Johnson, *1 Corinthians*, Leicester: IVP, 2004, 103.

³⁸⁶ Fee, *Corinthians*, 264.

³⁸⁷ Johnson, *Corinthians*, 101f.

In the next chapter, Paul gives instruction about marriage, continuing in the theme of the importance of undivided devotion to Christ. Though it is not explicitly stated that believers are ‘married’ to Christ, Merz draws attention to 7:32-34, where Paul speaks of the conflict of interests of those who are singly devoted to the Lord and those who have their attentions divided with their spouses.

While we do not yet find the metaphor of the individual as bride (which became widespread at a later date), the description at 1 Cor. 7:32-34 of the inevitable conflict that married couples will experience between the endeavour to please their marriage partner and to please Christ—a conflict which prompts the counsel that one should prefer the unmarried state—shows that Paul sees the relationship to Christ as analogous to marriage.³⁸⁸

2 Corinthians 11:2f In this passage, Paul sets out to defend his ministry against the ‘super-apostles’ whose teaching has infiltrated the Corinthian Church. He gives his motivation as a divine jealousy for this Church that he intensely loves and fears will be led astray from ‘pure devotion to Christ’ (11:3).

Ortland points out that this divine attribute, so prominent in the Old Testament usage of this metaphor ‘is no less operative in the Christian church of the New. But now that divine jealousy burns for the perfect union of Christ with his bride.’³⁸⁹

Paul states that he has betrothed the Corinthian Church to one Husband, to present them as a pure virgin to Christ. This betrothal must have occurred through his evangelistic ministry, at the time of the Corinthians’ conversion to faith in Christ. Immediate and total fidelity to Christ seems to be the requirement placed on the pure virgin Church from its inception.

The emphasis of the phrase ‘pure virgin’ suggests complete and total unadulterated devotion. Augustine draws the comparison, ‘Virginity of the mind is an irreproachable faith, a firm hope, a genuine love... Virginity of the flesh, an untouched body; virginity of the spirit, an unpolluted faith.’³⁹⁰ The Corinthians were in danger of polluting themselves before the return of Christ. But it is not the danger of a sexual violation of this betrothal that is indicated here, but a deception of the mind that constitutes spiritual adultery.

³⁸⁸ A. Merz, ‘Why Did the Bride of Christ (2 Cor 11:2) Become a Wedded Wife (Eph 5:22-33)?’, *JSNT* 79 (2000), 131-47, citing 142.

³⁸⁹ Ortland, *Whoredom*, 150. In 1 Cor. 10:7-22, Paul warns the Corinthians that their idolatry will provoke the Lord to jealousy.

³⁹⁰ Cited in Ortland, *Whoredom*, 149.

Considering the wedding customs model as operative in this imagery, the father of the bride would present his daughter to her husband at the wedding day.³⁹¹ It was his responsibility to watch over her virginity until that day. Paul, thus, is expressing his anxiety that the Corinthians will be of virginal status at the *parousia*, when he would present this Bride to her Husband, Christ.³⁹²

The verb ‘present’ clearly indicates the presentation will occur in the future, and ‘has a clearly eschatological reference’.³⁹³ Thrall points to 1 Thessalonians 4:17, underscoring that Paul expected this to occur in historical time.³⁹⁴

Harris, following Batey, rightly underscores how this metaphor captures ‘the ubiquitous New Testament tension between the “already” and the “not yet.”’³⁹⁵ Batey reinforces that the eschaton came in Jesus’ ministry only partially and the futuristic elements cannot be neglected. The concept of betrothal demonstrates the reality that the Church is presently the Bride of Christ, and as a result, ‘they should act accordingly’.³⁹⁶

But Paul is deeply concerned that the Church, as a figure of the new Eve, could also be corrupted.³⁹⁷ The locus of Eve’s deception was in her thoughts; she was led astray by the serpent’s cunning. Rabbinic literature suggests interpretations of Eve’s deception as a sexual encounter,³⁹⁸ but Martin emphasizes that the canonical form of Genesis 3 is the basis for Paul’s usage of this reference.³⁹⁹ Paul is referring to deception of the mind.

The possibility of ‘the corruption of his converts’ minds... and the loss of their initial single-mindedness and purity’ caused fear in Paul.⁴⁰⁰ It is not ‘moral corruption’

³⁹¹ R.P. Martin argues that here Paul is operating in the role of the friend of the bridegroom as in John 3:29, although he cites the other references to Paul being a father of the church in Corinth, 2 *Corinthians*, Waco: Word, 1986, 332.

³⁹² M.J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005, 736f; cf. Ortland, *Whoredom*, 149.

³⁹³ V.P. Furnish, *2 Corinthians*, New York: Doubleday, 1984, 486.

³⁹⁴ M.E. Thrall, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, London: T&T Clark, 2000, 2:659-660.

³⁹⁵ Harris, *Corinthians*, 738.

³⁹⁶ Batey, *Nuptial*, 14.

³⁹⁷ Thrall, *Corinthians*, 661.

³⁹⁸ Ortland, *Whoredom*, 150n28, citing *Yeb.*, 103b. Thrall further explains the rabbinic interpretations of Eve’s seduction, *Corinthians*, 662.

³⁹⁹ Martin, *Corinthians*, 333f.

⁴⁰⁰ Harris, *Corinthians*, 739.

but ‘intellectual deception’ that could lead to spiritual apostasy; Satan’s ‘most virulent attack is on the mind’.⁴⁰¹

In the Old Testament, spiritual adultery related to the worship of other gods, and reliance on political alliances other than Yahweh. Here, Paul hints that spiritual adultery in the New Testament is anything that draws believers away from a ‘sincere and pure devotion to Christ’. Deceptive thoughts and cunning words are the enemy’s tactics that led to Eve’s fall and the same is true here. Barnett argues that ‘Paul sees *words*—erroneous in content but smooth of delivery—as Satan’s instrument to seduce the Church from her loyalty to Christ.’⁴⁰² Other ‘gospels’ may sound appealing, but it is only the radical devotion to Christ alone, as communicated in the Apostles’ gospel, that ensures the virginal purity of the Bride until her future wedding day.

Ephesians 5:21-33 The authorship, date, and setting of the epistle to the Ephesians are widely debated. While the author identifies himself as Paul, scholarship is divided as to whether the viewpoints described are true Pauline or reflections of a later development in the Pauline school. While it is not within the scope of this thesis to delve into the broad issues surrounding authorship, date, and setting, we acknowledge the diversity in scholarly opinion.⁴⁰³

The passage in Ephesians 5-6 contains a household code for Christian families.⁴⁰⁴ However, couched in this discussion, is a very insightful teaching on the relationship of Christ and the Church. Dahl goes so far as to say

If one should place the chief emphasis on the teachings in Ephesians, the main point would be the statements about Christ and the church in Eph. 5:25-33. The scheme of household rules gives the author the opportunity to connect new, profound ideas about the mystical unity between Christ and the church.⁴⁰⁵

While the teaching of the roles of husband and wife is also the thrust of this paranesis, our focus, for the purpose of our study, will be on the relationship of Christ to the Church, and what this pericope has to say about the ‘profound mystery’.

⁴⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 741.

⁴⁰² P.W. Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1997, 502.

⁴⁰³ See H.W. Hoehner, *Ephesians*, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002, 6-61, for an overview of scholarship; he argues for a Pauline authorship. Best makes the case for a later authorship, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998, 6-44.

⁴⁰⁴ For Greco-Roman background of the household codes, see Best, *Ephesians*, 519-527.

⁴⁰⁵ N.A. Dahl, *Studies in Ephesians*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000, 422.

As a prelude to the household code, there is a description of ‘wise living’ (5:15-21). The final admonition, ‘submitting to one another in reverence to Christ’, serves as a bridge between the two passages. The first command in the household code (5:22) relies on the participle in verse 21; there is no verb in this phrase. It reads, ‘wives to your husbands’ so translators insert ‘submit’ to clarify the thought. However, the reliance on the participle in this verse emphasizes that all are to fear Christ, in the general sense of ‘fearing the Lord’.

Wives are to submit, as the Church submits to Christ, ‘in everything’. The Church submits to Christ in everything (theoretically); therefore, every individual in the Church must submit to Christ in everything. Paul reinforces the headship of Christ as a symbol of authority. Only here in the New Testament is Christ called ‘saviour of the body’.⁴⁰⁶ It is interesting to note that, here, the emphasis is on the Church being his body, rather than his Bride.

This exhortation is followed by the command to the husbands to love their wives, ‘as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her’ (5:25). A similar formula, ‘loved me and gave himself for me’ is found in Galatians 2:20, and in Ephesians 5:2, ‘loved us and gave himself for us’. It is used both with individual and corporate understanding; in 5:25, it is in the third person, referring to the universal Church. Best observes that ‘Christ is not presented as a husband but as a saviour who died’.⁴⁰⁷

Christ’s giving up of himself was to sanctify, cleanse, and present the Church to himself. The act of sanctifying is to separate someone or something for God as holy unto the Lord.⁴⁰⁸ In this manner, the Church is to belong solely to Christ. Christ’s death accomplished our sanctification. The cleansing probably relates to Christ’s atoning work, but in this specific incidence it also refers to ‘the washing of water with the word’ which most likely relates to baptism.⁴⁰⁹ The word may be the spoken word of the baptismal formula or profession of faith of the believer. Barth rather sentimentally suggests that it is Christ’s spoken words to every believer of ‘I love

⁴⁰⁶ Best, *Ephesians: A Shorter Commentary*, London: T&T Clark, 2003, 284.

⁴⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 285.

⁴⁰⁸ K. Snodgrass, *Ephesians*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996, 298.

⁴⁰⁹ *Ibid.* Snodgrass disagrees, as it would be referring to a corporate baptism of the church.

you.’⁴¹⁰ It could also relate to the ongoing preaching of the Word of God, which has a purifying and cleansing effect, or the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit.⁴¹¹

If we consider the network of associations with this metaphorical usage, the washing could also refer to the pre-nuptial bath.⁴¹² Additionally, Hoehner follows Sampley, arguing that the additional meaning of ‘espousing a wife’ for ‘sanctify’ should be considered here.⁴¹³ In rabbinic literature, the betrothal vows include a husband’s pronouncing his betrothed as *kadosh*, holy unto him, or sanctified unto him.⁴¹⁴ But it is not necessarily the intention in this passage. Lincoln argues that it is not the ‘force’ of the verb ‘to sanctify’ here.⁴¹⁵ Rather sanctification takes place through Christ’s atonement.

The whole point of Christ giving himself to sanctify and cleanse the Church is so that he can present her to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and blameless (5:27). The beauty of the Bride can be seen in light of Christ’s sanctifying work. It is possible to compare this passage with Ezekiel 16:10-14, where it speaks of Yahweh’s beautifying and adorning of Israel.⁴¹⁶

The Church is to be spotless, without a wrinkle, or any such thing. It might indicate that the Church is to be an ever-young bride. But it more likely relates to the pure status of the Bride, without any moral imperfections.⁴¹⁷

The splendour of Christ’s Bride relates to the Old Testament priestly purity, as well as the sacrifices, of being ‘holy and blameless’ or ‘without blemish’. This phase also appears in Ephesians 1:4, explaining how believers are chosen to be ‘holy and blameless’. As Lincoln states, ‘purity is the distinguishing mark of Christ’s church.’⁴¹⁸

Christ himself will present the Church to himself. This differs from the passage in 2 Corinthians 11:2, where Paul declares that he will present the Corinthian Church to Christ. It could be a distinction between the local Church, which Paul ‘fathered’, and the universal Church, as indicated in this verse.

⁴¹⁰ M. Barth, *Ephesians*, Garden City: Doubleday, 1974, 2:691. Hoehner considers the word to be the preached word of Christ’s love, *Ephesians*, 753.

⁴¹¹ Snodgrass, *Ephesians*, 298.

⁴¹² Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 753. He dismisses the possibility of baptism, and opts for this metaphorical bridal bath.

⁴¹³ *Ibid.*; Sampley, *Two*, 42-43, 129.

⁴¹⁴ Kidd. 2b, cited in Barth, *Ephesians*, 625n59.

⁴¹⁵ A.T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Dallas: Word, 1990, 375.

⁴¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 377. However, the beauty of every bride is a commonly known phenomenon.

⁴¹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴¹⁸ *Ibid.*

There are three points of view regarding when the presentation happens, 1) in the future, 2) in the past, or 3) a combination of the two.⁴¹⁹ Barth argues that the future interpretation ‘stays closest to the Greek text’.⁴²⁰ Murihead takes a more extreme view that the Church is not the Bride presently, but only at the *parousia*.⁴²¹

Lincoln criticizes this position. He insists that ‘glory and holiness are seen as present attributes of the Church’.⁴²² Christ’s ‘loving and sanctifying’ work has ‘already secured...a completely glorious and pure bride’, and he will maintain his Bride’s beauty.⁴²³ However, while in theory the Church is pure due to Christ’s sanctifying work, she does not live in this fullness.

Therefore, we agree with the third point of view. To say that the presentation has already occurred ignores the futurist elements in the Greek text, not to mention the less than perfected state of the current Church. To say that it completely takes place in the future negates the reality of the existing relationship of Christ and the Church portrayed in this passage.⁴²⁴ The Church is the Bride now, ‘and it is no idealized church but the existing church.’⁴²⁵ Batey argues that the metaphor captures the ‘already/not yet’ tension that is the reality for the kingdom today.⁴²⁶ Christ presents us to himself ‘in an immaculate state, now through grace and in the future through glory’.⁴²⁷

After this explanation of Christ’s relationship with the Church, Paul returns to the exhortation to husbands to love their wives, ‘as their own bodies’. It is reinforced with the statement, ‘He who loves his wife loves himself.’ It may be that the author considered the command in Leviticus 19:18 as a basis for this passage.⁴²⁸ The argument is further developed in the next verses, ‘For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes it and cherishes it, just as Christ does the Church, because we are members of his body’ (5:29f).

There is a variant reading to verse 30, ‘of his flesh and of his bones’. While both the shorter and the longer versions are well attested, if the longer version is original the

⁴¹⁹ Barth, *Ephesians*, 677-8.

⁴²⁰ *Ibid.*, 678.

⁴²¹ I.A. Murihead, ‘The Bride of Christ’, *SJT* 5 (1952), 175-87, citing 184.

⁴²² Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 377.

⁴²³ *Ibid.*

⁴²⁴ E. Best, *One Body in Christ*, London: SPCK, 1955, 175n3.

⁴²⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴²⁶ Batey, *Nuptial*, 29-30.

⁴²⁷ Aquinas, cited in Barth, *Ephesians*, 677.

⁴²⁸ *Ibid.*, 632f. He cites *Yeb.* 62b, as a possible influence on the author.

meaning is by no means clear. It could possibly be a reference to Genesis 2:23 to set up the quotation of the following verse. Hoehner takes it as original, suggesting it could be an analogy: ‘as Eve derived her physical life from Adam, we as believers derive our spiritual life from Christ.’⁴²⁹ Schnackenburg comments that the longer reading would enhance the patristic understanding of the Church being born out of the side-wound of Christ.⁴³⁰

Brueggemann brings out an interesting insight. ‘Flesh’, in Hebrew, can have a double meaning of ‘weakness’; ‘bone’ can also mean ‘power’.⁴³¹ Therefore, ‘bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh’ (Gen. 2:23) presents a covenantal formulation of solidarity, to be together ‘in weakness and in strength’ or ‘in frailty and in power’. He gives examples of this type of covenantal formula in the Old Testament (Judg. 9:2; 2 Sam. 5:1; 19:13f). He argues that Paul’s use of the ‘one flesh’ declaration is to demonstrate the covenantal quality of Christ’s relationship with the Church.

The relation of Christ and his bride-Church is grounded in a commonality of concern, loyalty and responsibility which is pledged to endure through weakness and strength...Christ and his Church are bound by vows which make them ‘one flesh’ i.e., one loyalty to endure all circumstances.⁴³²

His interpretation does not include a mystical ‘one flesh’ union but focuses on the covenantal aspect of Christ’s union with the Church. The body metaphor emphasizes our solidarity with Christ.⁴³³

Whether the shorter or longer version is adapted, the emphasis of verse 30 is that we are members of Christ’s body. Best points out that thus far the author has emphasized the relationship of the Church as a whole body to Christ, which differs from the interpersonal relations of the members, as is stressed in 1 Corinthians 12:12-27 and Romans 12:4-8. But in verse 30, the author addresses the individuals with the inclusive ‘we’ to remind the readers of their own participation in Christ’s body. The emphasis of “‘his body’ is on the Christ-believer relationship’ and his care for every individual member.”⁴³⁴

⁴²⁹ Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 770.

⁴³⁰ R. Schnackenburg, *Ephesians*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991, 254. He does not accept the longer version as original though.

⁴³¹ W. Brueggemann, ‘Of the Same Flesh and Bone’, *CBQ* 32/4 (1970), 532-542, citing 533.

⁴³² *Ibid.*, 541.

⁴³³ Snodgrass, *Ephesians*, 299. ‘The focus in Ephesians is on the solidarity between Christians and their Lord.’

⁴³⁴ Best, *Shorter*, 293.

The next verse includes the quote from Genesis 2:24, which presents the ‘one flesh’ relationship. Here however, it has a double meaning.⁴³⁵ First, it is for the husband to care for his wife, because she is a part of his own body. This would be the natural understanding.⁴³⁶ But then, verse 32 states, ‘The mystery is profound, but I speak of Christ and the Church.’ Paul used this same verse in 1 Corinthians 6:16 to illumine the believers’ spiritual union with Christ. It is likely a similar meaning is indicated here. In both passages, Paul moves from the spiritual (we are members of Christ’s body), to the natural (the quote from Gen. 2:24), and to back to the spiritual again (1 Cor. 6:17, of our spiritual union; Eph. 5:32, of the profound mystery of Christ and the Church).⁴³⁷

But some scholars argue that it is to be interpreted differently. The introduction of the ‘one flesh’ illustration in relation to ‘mystery’ in this passage has caused speculation if Gnostic myths influenced the understanding of the ‘one flesh’ metaphor in Ephesians.⁴³⁸ However, Lincoln points out that Ephesians makes a unique contribution, and instead, possibly was an influence on these later heresies.⁴³⁹

The term ‘mystery’ is used several times in Ephesians. It can mean what was previously hidden is now revealed in Christ.⁴⁴⁰ It is also used to speak of the unity that Christ brings. Dawes is careful to point out the difference between the mystery of the ‘horizontal unity’ amongst believers, especially in Chapter 3 and the ‘vertical unity’ with Christ in Chapter 5.⁴⁴¹

The ‘mystery’ is ‘profound’, not due to its obscurity, but rather to its importance. As it relates to ‘one flesh’, there are three main opinions. The first takes the ‘mystery’ to relate primarily to human marriage. One option is the sacramental, that through human marriage, we participate in the divine union of Christ and the Church. A serious problem with this interpretation is that it closely resembles the pagan *hieros gamos* myths that the Prophets condemned. It is inconceivable that Paul (or any author of a Pauline school, for that matter) could have portrayed the Christ-Church relationship in a manner similar to a pagan ritual.

⁴³⁵ M. MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, Collegeville: Liturgical, 2000, 331.

⁴³⁶ Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 771-774.

⁴³⁷ *Ibid.*, 778.

⁴³⁸ Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 362-363; cf. Batey, *Nuptial*, 31-33, 36-37.

⁴³⁹ Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 363; cf. Dahl, *Ephesians*, 421.

⁴⁴⁰ See Dawes, *Body*, 185-191.

⁴⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 190.

Moritz takes a different stance to correct the misunderstanding of a *hieros gamos* re-enactment of the Christ-Church relationship in marriage. He argues that the mystery does relate to human marriage, not union with Christ. As Christians, we experience a new type of marriage related to Christ's relationship with the Church, 'the new dimension added to Christian marital life', which is the command for husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the Church.⁴⁴²

Perhaps it is best to conclude that the author of Ephesians regarded Gen 2.24 as an exposition of prototypical marriage—representative of the old creation—whereas marriage inspired by the Christ-church relationship constitutes human marriage in its fullness.⁴⁴³

He rejects all possibility of any *hieros gamos* in this verse. While we will not go as far as Moritz to say that there is no allegorical reference to our spiritual union with Christ, we agree with him, that this passage does not indicate 'a mystical participation with Christ via marriage'.⁴⁴⁴

The second interpretation of the 'mystery' is that the original marriage of Adam and Eve serves as a pre-figure of the Christ-Church marriage. Ortland argues that the purpose of creation, and specifically marriage, is to portray the Christ-Church relationship. He contends that our relationship with God in Christ is marital in nature.⁴⁴⁵ The 'one flesh' relationship of human marriage is to demonstrate the unity between Christ and the Church.⁴⁴⁶ O'Brien, following Ortland, argues that Christian marriage is the miniature reproduction of the 'beauty shared between the Bridegroom and the Bride'.⁴⁴⁷ Batey goes even further, stating, 'The "one flesh" experience of human marriage is taken as a key for unlocking the mystery of the divine *henosis* shared by Christ and the church.'⁴⁴⁸

While it is true that Paul uses the Christ-Church relationship as a model for human marriage, Best argues that the divine marriage is not necessarily a reality. Rather, he argues that it is a metaphor, because nuptial imagery is used in a variety of

⁴⁴² T. Moritz, *A Profound Mystery*, Leiden: Brill, 1996, 146.

⁴⁴³ *Ibid.*, 146n124.

⁴⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 152.

⁴⁴⁵ Ortland, *Whoredom*, 8, 23.

⁴⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 152-159.

⁴⁴⁷ P.T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Leicester: Apollos, 1999, 434; cf. Ortland, *Whoredom*, 158.

⁴⁴⁸ Batey, *Nuptial*, 31.

ways in the New Testament; ‘it is permissible to alter a metaphor but not to change reality.’⁴⁴⁹

Therefore, he argues the prophetic metaphor of marriage is behind Paul’s argument, augmented by the story of Adam and Eve.

The third interpretation of the mystery is that of our union with Christ.

Witherington states

The great mystery in v.32, as elsewhere in Ephesians has to do with God’s salvation plan for creating a people or a body of Christ, but more particularly here it has to do with the nature of the mysterious spiritual union between [Christ and the Church] that results from the saving act, a union which neither divinizes the church nor dissolves the separate identity of either Christ or Christians.⁴⁵⁰

The quote from Genesis 2:24 is used metaphorically for our spiritual union with Christ. Our union with Christ is a reality, depicted through various metaphors in Ephesians – the body, the building, and the bride. Therefore, we contend that all these metaphors point to the reality of this union, but to state that the relationship with God is marital in nature pushes the metaphor too far. Rather, it is the limits of our language to describe the exact nature of the relationship that requires the employment a variety of metaphors. Therefore, the ‘one flesh’ reference remains a metaphor, not a literal ‘special marriage relationship’.⁴⁵¹

However, the metaphorical usage of this marital imagery in Ephesians impacts the way we look at human marriage; it is transformed in the light of Christ’s great love for the Church.⁴⁵² Grappling with the concept of being a part of the body of Christ changes our understanding of our spiritual union with him. ‘Christians are assumed to be so intimately joined to Christ that they are *part of him*.’⁴⁵³ Similarly, the pairing of the *vehicle* of husband or bridegroom with the Christological tenor influences how we perceive our spiritual unity with God.

The final verse in this section draws the reader back to the first exhortations to husbands and wives, to ‘each one of you’ (5:33). Once again, wives are to fear their husbands, and husbands are to love their wives. Hoehner notes that *agape* is used six times in this passage, and ‘it refers to love irrespective of merit, even to the

⁴⁴⁹ Best, *One*, 182.

⁴⁵⁰ B. Witherington III, *The Letters to Philemon, the Colossians, and the Ephesians*, Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2007, 333.

⁴⁵¹ Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 381. He argues that the ‘mystery’ is ‘the special marriage relationship of Christ and the church’.

⁴⁵² *Ibid.*, 389.

⁴⁵³ Snodgrass, *Ephesians*, 299.

undeserving...unconditionally. Its intent is to seek the highest good in the one loved.⁴⁵⁴ While wives are to respect their husbands, the greater emphasis is for the husband to love his wife, as both of them submit to Christ.

While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to explore the implications of the household code in our society's differing expressions of marital roles, we appreciate Best's comment: 'The non-acceptance of a patriarchal idea of marriage cannot mean that the authority of Christ over the church can be set aside; he is its head.'⁴⁵⁵

Revelation

The book of Revelation has been called 'the most difficult and confusing' book to interpret in the New Testament.⁴⁵⁶ The symbolic language resembles other Jewish apocalyptic literature of the first century. While it is a prophetic book, it also has a historical basis.⁴⁵⁷ The author of this book, identified as John, has traditionally been accepted as the Apostle John, son of Zebedee, and that he composed the book towards the end of the first century.⁴⁵⁸

With the myriad of opinions as how to interpret Revelation, scholarship sets forth four general approaches to the interpretation of this book. They are the preterist, historical, idealist, and futuristic points of view.⁴⁵⁹ Within each category there are diverse readings. The preterist considers the events of Revelation to already have occurred, centred on the destruction of Rome or Jerusalem. The historicist contends for a historical basis for the Apocalypse, and pins different events in history to the imagery in the book. This point of view was particularly popular during the Reformation, where Rome, and specifically the papacy, was viewed as the source of

⁴⁵⁴ Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 747.

⁴⁵⁵ Best, *Ephesians*, 561.

⁴⁵⁶ G.E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, Cambridge: Lutterworth, 1994 (2nd), 670.

⁴⁵⁷ The crisis within Revelation has been traditionally understood as Roman persecution during Domitian's reign. Recent scholarship has proposed a variety of other possibilities such as social conflict within the churches in Asia Minor, P.B. Duff, *Who Rides the Beast?* Oxford: OUP, 2001, 14. See 5-14 for a concise overview of divergent views in recent scholarship.

⁴⁵⁸ The authorship and date of Revelation are widely debated. For an overview of the argument for an early dating, see K.L. Gentry, Jr., *Before Jerusalem Fell*, Atlanta: American Vision, 1998, 334-337, *passim*. J.R. Michaels points to a later date, *Interpreting the Book of Revelation*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992, 19-22. D.E. Aune argues the book was received in two editions; the majority of the book was written in the wake of the Roman-Jewish war, while the letters in Chapters 2-3 probably date from the last decade of the first century, *Revelation 1-5*, Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997, A:cxvii-cxxxiv.

⁴⁵⁹ C.M. Pate, *Reading Revelation*, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2009. For a concise overview of prominent schools of interpretation, see 7-13. Also K. Gentry et al, *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998, although this book does not include the historical perspective; rather, it provides two variations of the futurist interpretations; see 19-34 for a summary.

evil, the anti-Christ, harlot, and so forth. The idealist, on the other hand, does not limit the interpretation of the Apocalypse to past events or future occurrences but instead reads the Revelation as symbolic literature full of timeless truths in the battle to overcome evil. The futurist considers the book as a prophecy of future events. Within the futurist camp, there are many subdivisions, including dispensationalism and premillennial historicism.

Each school of interpretation has various arguments regarding the timing of the final events of the book of Revelation. For our purposes, we will not explore these different perspectives in depth but look at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb as a future event.⁴⁶⁰ While it is possible to see nuances of marital imagery earlier in the book,⁴⁶¹ we will examine the more explicit imagery in Chapters 19-22: the Marriage Supper of the Lamb (19:7-9), the New Jerusalem adorned as a bride (21:2, 9), and the prayer of the Spirit and the Bride (22:17). We will also look at the contrast of the two cities, the Harlot and the Bride, in Chapters 17-22.

Revelation 19:7-9 The announcement of the Marriage Supper of the Lamb is made abruptly after the jubilation of all of heaven in 19:1-6. The Babylon has fallen and amidst this jubilation, a mighty voice declares that the Marriage Supper of the Lamb has come. There is no description of the event, and it is ‘at this point, entirely unexpected’.⁴⁶² In this announcement, the usual word for wedding, *gamos*, is not used. Rather it is more accurately translated ‘marriage supper’. Furthermore, *gune*, woman or wife, is used instead of *nymphē*, the commonly used word for bride. While it could simply be interchange of words, for a betrothed woman is already considered her future husband’s ‘woman’,⁴⁶³ it also underscores the metaphoric element of this

⁴⁶⁰ Batey, *Nuptial*, 14; Ortlund, *Whoredom*, 161-164. *Contra* Smolarz, *Covenant*, 253, who, following Wright, asserts the *parousia* occurred in 70 CE. Therefore, he argues that the Marriage Supper took place in the aftermath of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem.

⁴⁶¹ R. Zimmerman argues the nuptial imagery is more widespread, pointing to implicit bridal imagery in Rev. 2:11; 3:10; 14:4f; 18:23, as well as the explicit imagery in the final chapters, ‘Nuptial Imagery in the Revelation of John’, *Bib* 84 (2003), 153-183. Smolarz expands this premise to highlight implicit references to marital imagery in nearly every chapter of Revelation, *Covenant*, 228-365, *passim*.

⁴⁶² D.E. Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, WBC, Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998, C:1029.

⁴⁶³ *Ibid.*, This ‘fits Jewish marriage customs in which engagement was a legally binding initiation of marriage consummated by the wedding...’ He also recalls Paul’s ‘betrothal’ of the Corinthian church to Christ at conversion, to be presented to him at the *parousia*.

announcement.⁴⁶⁴ Rather than pointing to an actual event of a wedding, it probably is a ‘metaphorical way of alluding to the final redemptive fact when “the dwelling of God is with men.”’⁴⁶⁵

Aune argues that the Bride is not defined: ‘It is important to observe that the notion of “the wife” of the Lamb is mentioned enigmatically but not further defined or described,’ only that she has ‘made herself ready’ and is given ‘fine linen, bright and pure’.⁴⁶⁶ This linen is explained as ‘the righteous deeds of the saints’. However, the word translated as ‘righteous deeds’ is *dikaionomata* and is only used here to describe people. In other places, it refers to the ‘ordinances’ or ‘statutes’ of God.⁴⁶⁷ So there is a possibility it could refer to the decree of God, making the Bride righteous, but it more likely refers to the response of the Bride.⁴⁶⁸ Ladd argues that the work referred to in Ephesians 5:25 speaks of Christ’s redemption, but here it speaks of the preparation of the Bride:

[P]reparation is demanded on the part of Christians. While redemption is altogether a work of God in Christ, there must be a human response. “When he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. And every one who thus hope in him purifies himself as he is pure” (I John 3:2-3).⁴⁶⁹

Beasley-Murray recalls the emphasis on good works in the letters to the seven Churches, and relates this to the preparation. ‘The Bride *made herself ready* through repentance and faith and continuance in the righteous deeds which are the fruit of faith.’⁴⁷⁰ However, he argues that the fine linen symbolizes the gift of God’s holiness imparted to the Bride, but it correlates with the tension of Philippians 2:12f, that as God works in us to do his will, we are to work out our salvation in fear and trembling.⁴⁷¹

⁴⁶⁴ G.E. Ladd, *Revelation*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973, 248, ‘This flexibility of meaning makes it clear that the entire idea of bride-wife is a metaphor which describes the relationship of the church to Christ in both its present and future states.’

⁴⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶⁶ Aune, *Revelation*, C:1029.

⁴⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, C:1030f; Ladd, *Revelation*, 249.

⁴⁶⁸ ‘While the wedding garment is a divine gift, this is not an arbitrary or formal matter, but a dynamic one. The saints who are summoned to the Lamb’s feast are those who have exercised steadfast endurance, who have kept the commandments of God and have persevered in their faith in Jesus (Rev 14:12),’ Ladd, *Revelation*, 249. Cf. Aune, *Revelation*, C:1031. However, K.E. Miller argues that it is the imputed righteousness from Jesus that enables the Bride to be joined to the Bridegroom, implicitly for the battles to come, ‘The Nuptial Eschatology of Revelation 19-22’, *CBQ* 60/2 (1998), 301-318, citing 312-14.

⁴⁶⁹ Ladd, *Revelation*, 249.

⁴⁷⁰ Beasley-Murray, *Revelation*, 274.

⁴⁷¹ *Ibid.*

While the Church is currently the Bride/Wife of Christ, Beasley-Murray underscores that the perfection of the Bride ‘belongs to the eschatological future’.⁴⁷² It exemplifies the ‘*now* and the *not yet* of the New Testament doctrine of salvation in the kingdom of God’.⁴⁷³

Blessed are those who are invited to the Marriage Supper of the Lamb! This invitation echoes the concept of eschatological feasting found in Isaiah 25:6f and alluded to in Jesus’ parables. The guests who are invited are probably the people who constitute the Bride. This makes the metaphor problematic, but it also carries over from the gospels where the bride is not present in the nuptial parables (only mentioned in John 3:29) and the friends of the Bridegroom are his disciples, and John the Baptist. The people of God are both the Bride and the guests.

Once again, Aune underscores the importance of understanding that the Bridegroom is identified with Yahweh in the Old Testament, and only rarely attested in later rabbinic literature as the Messiah.⁴⁷⁴ The Marriage Supper is the fulfilment of the divine promise and forthcoming declaration, ‘Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people and God himself will be with them as their God’ (21:3).

Caird notes the three themes from the Old Testament that John has woven into this declaration.⁴⁷⁵ First, the establishment of the reign of God accompanied by a great feast; second, the Bride of Yahweh/Christ; and third, clean garments as a symbol of sanctity. Clean linen is also mentioned in 7:14, with imagery of the martyrs ‘who washed their robes and made them white in the life-blood of the Lamb.’ Caird underscores that ‘it is martyrdom which has provided the prothalamium to the wedding of the Lamb.’⁴⁷⁶

Revelation 21:2, 9 After the return of Christ, the millennium, and final judgement, a new heaven and a new earth⁴⁷⁷ appear as the setting for the holy city, the New Jerusalem. This city comes down from heaven, ‘prepared as a bride adorned for her

⁴⁷² *Ibid.*, 273.

⁴⁷³ *Ibid.*, 273f.

⁴⁷⁴ Aune, *Revelation*, C:1030.

⁴⁷⁵ G.B. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine*, London: A&C Black, 1966, 234.

⁴⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷⁷ Beasley-Murray, *Revelation*, 307. He argues that John viewed ‘the new heaven and the new earth as newly created, in the strictest sense of the term’ because they are to ‘replace the old creation’ that ceases to exist.

husband’.⁴⁷⁸ Aune comments that this *topos* of ‘adorned as a bride’ is found in other literature of the period.⁴⁷⁹ The Bride-city is adorned with jewellery that resembles the imagery in Isaiah 54:11f, speaking of the restored Jerusalem.⁴⁸⁰ The jewels listed in Revelation 21 are similar to those of the high priest’s garment, indicating the priestly role of the inhabitants of the New Jerusalem.⁴⁸¹ They are the ones who will minister to God. This is the consummation of redemptive history: ‘They will see his face’ (Rev. 22:4).⁴⁸² We will know him fully, even as we are fully known (1 Cor. 13:12).

In the Prophets, we read of Jerusalem as the Bride of Yahweh, both the people and the land figured into the metaphor. Here it is likely the same; the New Jerusalem is symbolic of the saints.⁴⁸³ Witherington notes that John’s emphasis is not ‘an eschatological restoration of the city in the eschatological era’ but the focus is ‘the people of God being a city/temple where God dwells’.⁴⁸⁴

Revelation 22:17 The last explicit reference to the metaphor of marriage in this book comes at the very conclusion. In 22:17, we read, ‘The Spirit and the Bride say, Come!’⁴⁸⁵

There are three predominant points of view on the interpretation of this verse. First, Caird argues that the entire prayer is a summons to people who are outside the fold of God, to come and repent while there is still time.⁴⁸⁶ While this is possible, in light of Jesus’ promise that he is coming soon (22:7, 12), it is more likely a summons for Jesus to come back for his Bride. In the second point of view, the first invitation of the verse is understood as a summons to Jesus, while the next would be an invitation to others to come to the banquet, ‘Let all who are thirsty come’. Michaels sees a

⁴⁷⁸ In both verses 2 and 9, the word *nymphe* is used to describe the adornment of the city, but in verse 9 the city is referred to as both the *nymphe* and the *gune* of the Lamb.

⁴⁷⁹ Aune, *Revelation*, C:1121f.

⁴⁸⁰ J. Fekkes, ‘“His Bride Has Prepared Herself”: Revelation 19-21 and Isaian Nuptial Imagery’, *JBL* 109/2 (1990), 267-87, citing 274-282.

⁴⁸¹ Ex. 28:17-21, Aune, *Revelation*, C:1187.

⁴⁸² Ladd, *Revelation*, 277.

⁴⁸³ Aune, *Revelation*, C:1122. But E.S. Fiorenza argues that the city, not the people, is the Wife of the Lamb; the New Jerusalem cannot be both a city and a people. She interprets the wall of the city to symbolize the Christian community; rather, the New Jerusalem is the dwelling place and inheritance of the people of God. However, the righteous acts of the saints ‘beautify the city’, *Revelation*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993, 102.

⁴⁸⁴ B. Witherington III, *Revelation*, Cambridge: CUP, 2003, 267.

⁴⁸⁵ Beasley-Murray argues, based on the precedence in Rom. 8:26, that the Spirit will impel the Bride to cry out for Jesus to come, and then he will join the Bride in this prayer, *Revelation*, 344.

⁴⁸⁶ Caird, *Revelation*, 286-287; Ladd, *Revelation*, 294.

connection here with 19:7, 9 and views the last invitation of the verse, ‘to come to waters’, as Jesus extending the call to all to come to the banquet, to him, as the living water.⁴⁸⁷ Aune suggests a third possibility, that the final call of the verse is an invitation for others to join in the prayer for Jesus to come back.⁴⁸⁸ We agree that it is most likely the Bride, along with the Spirit, summoning the Bridegroom to come,⁴⁸⁹ followed by the invitation to others to come to Jesus. It is a response to Jesus’ promise, ‘Behold I am coming soon.’

Revelation 17-22: The Contrast of the Two Cities Commentators acknowledge the parallel descriptions of the two feminine cities portrayed in Revelation 17-22, the Harlot and the Bride. Fee calls it, ‘the (original) *Tale of Two Cities*’.⁴⁹⁰ Babylon, the Harlot, is contrasted with New Jerusalem, the Bride.

Chapters 17-18 portray a symbolic Babylon as the enemy of God’s people. The evil of this city is metaphorically cloaked in the language of harlotry. Gregory elucidates the possibilities of the author’s reasons for choosing Babylon as a symbol in the Apocalypse, against other biblical possibilities such as Tyre and Egypt. He explores the Old Testament prophecies regarding this city, as well as historical relationship with Israel and Judah. Revelation 14:8 and 18:2 take up the language of Isaiah 21:9, to declare the demise of Babylon: ‘Fallen, fallen is Babylon!’ The symbolic nature of this city portrays the certain fall of the enemy of God’s people. Gregory underscores that

Revelation also proclaimed beforehand the fall and judgment of another Babylon, that is, Rome, and of every incarnation of Babylon that would follow. The fall of the first Babylon (fulfilled in Daniel 5) guarantees the fall of every present and future Babylon.⁴⁹¹

The Prophets proclaimed in advance what would certainly follow in the future. Though Rome persecuted the Early Church and occupied Jerusalem, Rome would indeed itself fall eventually. While the language in Revelation 17-18 points to first

⁴⁸⁷ J.R. Michaels, *Revelation*, Leicester: IVP, 1997, 256. He agrees that initially it is the Bride summoning Jesus, but then it is Jesus who extends the invitation to the eschatological banquet. Is. 55:1 contains a similar invitation.

⁴⁸⁸ Aune, *Revelation*, C:1237.

⁴⁸⁹ Zimmerman, ‘Nuptial’, 182.

⁴⁹⁰ G.D. Fee, *Revelation*, Eugene: Cascade Books, 2011, 228. He correlates this imagery of the Harlot with the commerce and culture of Rome, 228-262. See Aune, *Revelation*, C:979-982 for an overview of ancient writers who describe Rome in a similar manner to Rev. 18.

⁴⁹¹ P.F. Gregory, ‘Its End Is Destruction: Babylon the Great in the Book of Revelation’, *CTQ* 73 (2009), 137-153, citing 143.

century Rome, it is also symbolic of the world system, which is the ongoing enemy of God's people.⁴⁹² 'The way in which Revelation weaves together a variety of images and pictures from the Old Testament also prevents "Babylon" from being read as a single reality.'⁴⁹³

Witherington sees the use of the two feminine *topoi* as a part of John's 'rhetorical strategy'.⁴⁹⁴ The purity of the New Jerusalem is contrasted with Babylon in various ways,⁴⁹⁵ such as the purity of the white linen of the Bride in 19:8 and the scarlet and purple linen of the Harlot in 17:4; 18:16. Similarly both women-cities are symbolically adorned with jewellery; the Harlot wears gold, jewels, and pearls of opulence, whereas the New Jerusalem's jewels symbolize the priestly purity (Rev. 21:11, 18-21).

The New Jerusalem endures forever, while Babylon will certainly be defeated. This promise inspires hope in the readers and focuses their attention on the supreme sovereignty of God.

This metaphor has been interpreted as an example of redemption history: the Bride ultimately triumphs over all her enemies, and God's kingdom is established. However, what is often overlooked is the personal responsibility of every believer and member of the Bride to 'make herself/himself ready'. The Harlot of culture still remains as a persecutor of the Bride. The Babylon of today still lures the Bride to spiritual adultery. The metaphor relates to redemption history but it is necessary to understand that we are, in the present, God's treasured Bride. While there are many mysteries and viewpoints in the interpretation of this imagery, we are to live in response to what is clear through this metaphor. We are to live as the 'chaste bride' now, a people who abide in God's love, and demonstrate their faith and love through obeying his commands. We are temples of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, we are to live lives worthy of this reality, of God with us, while looking forward to the New Jerusalem where it will be fully realized. There, we will see him face to face.

⁴⁹² Gentry argues it points to Jerusalem, *Views*, 73-79; *Jerusalem*, *passim*.

⁴⁹³ Gregory, 'End', 152.

⁴⁹⁴ Witherington, *Revelation*, 217.

⁴⁹⁵ See Beasley-Murray, *Revelation*, 315-317, for further comparisons.

Conclusion

In our survey of the New Testament use of the Bridegroom metaphor, we have seen how the authors employed similar networks of association as the Prophets, but the Song of Songs was not featured.

John uses nuptial imagery to express the new order of worship in the New Covenant; the wedding at Cana, the Baptist's testimony, and the encounter with the Samaritan woman all display a piece of the New Covenant mosaic portrayed in the first chapters of the gospel. Jesus is the eschatological Bridegroom to whom the Bride belongs.

The synoptic writers all include the parables of Jesus that convey the newness of Jesus' ministry and his self-identification as the Bridegroom; he indeed is the eschatological Bridegroom who establishes the New Covenant. Matthew further develops the imagery to link the eschatological feast with the new betrothal. Only those who respond to Jesus and put his teaching into practice will be ready for the final judgment. Spiritual adultery is now interpreted as unfaithfulness to Jesus, through unbelief or being ashamed of him. James further develops this theme to emphasize the exclusiveness of the New Covenant: friendship with the world is spiritual adultery. Fidelity to Jesus, both in our words and lifestyle choices, is essential.

Paul also incorporates the model of covenantal faithfulness and betrothal in his use of the metaphor. The individual believers who comprise the Church are called to purity of devotion to Christ—here it is right doctrine and teaching. Deception and false teaching can lead to spiritual adultery. Believers' relationship with Christ is a 'one flesh' union; we are temples of the Holy Spirit. Through this union we become the body of Christ.

Though we have a deposit and experience of this spiritual union, the betrothal imagery serves as a metaphor for the 'already/not yet' reality of the kingdom. We continue to look forward to the fullness of our union with Christ when we will know him, even as we are fully known, and we will see his face.

The Bridegroom metaphor communicates the establishment of the New Covenant in betrothal terms, a fulfilment of the prophetic promises. The New Testament writers used the metaphor of Jesus the Bridegroom to express the fidelity required of the Bride. They followed the Old Testament Prophets use of the models of patriarchal marriage and covenant. The romantic, egalitarian models found in the

Song of Songs do not feature in the New Testament's depiction of Jesus the Bridegroom.

RECEPTION HISTORY

Introduction

As the fledgling Church spread out from its Jewish context, Hellenistic traditions and values began to permeate the emerging Church doctrine. The metaphor of Jesus the Bridegroom was not immune to this influence. Neo-Platonism with its dualistic worldview, the allegorizing of literature, and various other cultural values impacted the interpretation of Jesus the Bridegroom. The canonical metaphor of Bridegroom moved out of the network of associations of the New Covenant, and was re-employed by the Church Fathers for different purposes.

The New Testament teaching on celibacy provided a new aspiration for the Early Church. To be like the angels (Mark 12:25; Matt. 22:30), or a eunuch for the kingdom (Matt. 19:12) became a desirable goal in the present as well as for the future. Paul's teaching on remaining celibate 'for the time is short' (1 Cor. 7:29) also provided an impetus to abstain from marriage.⁴⁹⁶

Now, marriage was no longer the foremost option for women; singleness for Christ's sake became a viable opportunity in the Early Church.⁴⁹⁷ Many esteemed virginity and celibacy, and perceived this as 'a higher virtue' than marriage.⁴⁹⁸ Jesus became known as the 'celibate Bridegroom'; the bridal metaphor for New Covenantal faithfulness morphed into a designation for celibates and consecrated virgins.⁴⁹⁹

The Celibate Bridegroom and the Brides of Christ

Elliott traces the development of the title of 'Bride of Christ'.⁵⁰⁰ Although this name is not found anywhere in the canonical literature, it became the counterpart to the metaphor of Jesus the Bridegroom. Whereas the corporate sense is indicated in the

⁴⁹⁶ See E.A. Clark, *Reading Renunciation*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999, especially 259-330.

⁴⁹⁷ The vastly popular apocryphal story of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* provided another model for women. See D. Elliott, *The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012, 10.

⁴⁹⁸ D. Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1995, 22.

⁴⁹⁹ E.A. Clark explores the various uses of this metaphor in ascetic rhetoric, 'The Celibate Bridegroom and His Virginal Brides: Metaphor and the Marriage of Jesus in Early Christian Ascetic Exegesis', *CH* 77/1 (2008), 1-25.

⁵⁰⁰ Elliott, *Bride*, 9-62.

New Testament, the Church Fathers assigned this label specifically to women who chose to remain virgins for the sake of Christ.

A new ecclesiastical echelon emerged: women who chose virginity for the kingdom of God. These women ‘disturbed the social order’.⁵⁰¹ But the male leadership in the Church did not appreciate the liberties of the virgins. Tertullian wrote several treatises against the adornment and behaviour of these virgins. In his writings, he uses the title ‘bride of Christ’.⁵⁰² By assigning this title to these women, he and others attempted to exert their control over this group through the publication of tractates and letters. Although the wearing of veils was only for married women, Tertullian argued that as Christ’s brides, these virgins should display the appropriate modesty by wearing veils. Those who resisted the veil were disparaged.⁵⁰³

As the bishop was the representative of Christ ‘the Bridegroom’, these ‘brides’ were eventually cloistered and put under the surveillance of ecclesiastical leadership.⁵⁰⁴ Athanasius exerted substantial influence in removing these women from the public sphere. While it was partially for the protection of these women, not all of his motives were altruistic. In his quest against Arius, there were virgins who supported both teachers and played an active role in this ecclesiastical battle in Alexandria.⁵⁰⁵ Athanasius sought to eliminate this problem through restructuring the boundaries of virgins and placing them into private communities, thus limiting their involvement in public debate or support of his opponents.⁵⁰⁶

Later, Ambrose, the bishop of Milan, instigated a religious ceremony in which virgins were officially veiled and consecrated as ‘brides of Christ’.⁵⁰⁷ These vows were taken seriously, and any breach of virginity was seen as a potentially mortal sin.⁵⁰⁸

The metaphor of Jesus the celibate Bridegroom played an important role in ascetic teaching. The ascetics employed this metaphor for their own purposes, often to propagate their agendas. But the metaphor of Jesus the celibate Bridegroom never lost

⁵⁰¹ J. McNamara, ‘A New Song: Celibate Women in the First Three Christian Centuries’, *Women in History* 6/7 (1983), 1-154, citing 1.

⁵⁰² This title or a form of it appears in *Ad. Uxorem* I.4, 4; *De Resurrectione* 61,6; *De Virginibus* 16, 4; cited in H. Crouzel, *Origen*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989, 122n3. These are the earliest references of this title in the existent works from the Church Fathers.

⁵⁰³ Elliott, *Bride*, 15.

⁵⁰⁴ McNamara, ‘New’, 121.

⁵⁰⁵ Brakke, *Athanasius*, 65f.

⁵⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 139f.

⁵⁰⁷ Elliott, *Bride*, 46f.

⁵⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 58-61.

the natural nuptial associations, and the erotic overtones were put to use in the polemic to maintain continence for Christ's sake. Clark investigates Patristic literature where this metaphor has 'run riot', employing imagery of the nuptial bed with a passionate bridegroom, but of course, one who is celibate and divine.⁵⁰⁹ This rhetoric was used to persuade faltering ascetics to ponder on their beds the jealous love of Christ, and encourage them to remain celibate.

The name 'Bride of Christ' now belonged to individuals; Jesus the Bridegroom was no longer the 'Husband of his People' but the Bridegroom of many virgins, both male and female. The ascetic elite employed the marital metaphor for its individualistic purposes.

In such an atmosphere, it is little wonder that the allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs became the *premier model* for appreciating the Bridegroom metaphor.

Song of Songs and Origen

For the ascetically minded Church Fathers, the literal meaning of the Song of Songs presented a problem. This love song, though metaphorically construed, extolled the beauty of *eros* between a man and a woman. Its canonical status encouraged the Fathers, particularly Origen, to sublimate the literal meaning and present this erotic Song as the allegory of Christ's love for the Church, or more commonly, the individual soul. Thus, the Song of Songs became *the* point of contact for encountering Jesus the Bridegroom. As the allegorical meaning became accepted as the *real* meaning, the Song was then literalized as the love song between Christ and the Church. Subsequent generations of exegetes and mystics received the metaphor of Jesus the Bridegroom through the lens of the Song of Songs.

It is uncertain exactly when the Christian allegorical interpretation of Song of Songs became the primary rendering of the Song. Hippolytus authored an allegorical commentary on the Song of Songs around 190 CE; its focus was the salvation history of the people of God.⁵¹⁰

Origen began his ten-volume commentary on the Song of Songs in Athens in 240 CE and completed it later in Caesarea. Only the prologue and first two books are extant as well as the two homilies. However, these copies are Latin translations; the

⁵⁰⁹ Clark, 'Celibate', 1, *passim*.

⁵¹⁰ E.A. Clark, *Ascetic Piety and Women's Faith*, Lewiston: Mellen, 1986, 397.

former by Rufus, the latter by Jerome. The importance of these works ‘cannot be overstated’.⁵¹¹ These allegorical treatments influenced the mystical theology of the Church.⁵¹² Regarding these works on the Song of Songs, Jerome declares, ‘While Origen surpassed all writers in his other books, in his Song of Songs he surpassed himself.’⁵¹³

For Origen, the Song of Songs described the relationship between the Logos and the perfected Bride. It was a purely spiritual book.

If these words are not to be spiritually understood, are they not mere tales? If they conceal no hidden mystery, are they not unworthy of God? He, therefore, who can discern the spiritual sense of Scripture, or if he cannot, yet desires so to do, must strive his utmost to live not after flesh and blood, so that he may become worthy of spiritual mysteries and—if I may speak more boldly—of spiritual desire and love, if such indeed there be.⁵¹⁴

Origen perceived the Church as pre-existent, the spouse of Christ, from before the foundation of the world.⁵¹⁵ Since Christ was pre-existent, his Wife-Church must also be. He adhered to a Neo-Platonic worldview, in which fallen souls were to eventually return to their pre-fallen state of union with God.⁵¹⁶ ‘Carnal love’, which related to the fallen self, must be denied, and ‘spiritual love’ must be cultivated to ascend to original state of perfection. Neo-Platonic thought also incorporates nuptial imagery: ‘The soul loves God, wishing to be united to him, being, as it were the desire of a noble virgin to be united to a noble love.’⁵¹⁷ Origen maintained the sense of the corporate Church as the Bride, yet he underscored that it was the individual soul that sought and attained union with Christ.

For Origen, the text of the Song of Songs was the ultimate point of contact with the Logos, the divine Bridegroom. He read the song as the ‘eschatological “spirit” of scripture made wholly manifest in textual form’.⁵¹⁸ It was the song ‘which the

⁵¹¹ M.S.M. Scott, ‘Review of J.C. King, *Origen on the Song of Songs as the Spirit of Scripture*’, *Theology & Sexuality* 13/1 (2006), 103-105, citing 105.

⁵¹² *Ibid.*

⁵¹³ Jerome’s introduction to his translation of the Homilies, in Origen, *Song*, 265.

⁵¹⁴ Origen, *Song*, 270; *First Homily* 2.

⁵¹⁵ See Lawson’s explanation in Origen, *Song*, 14.

⁵¹⁶ Crouzel, *Origen*, 122f.

⁵¹⁷ Plotinus, *Enn.* VI, ix.9, cited in C. Chavasse, *Bride of Christ*, London: Faber & Faber, 1940, 174.

Plotinus, the founder of Neo-Platonism, was a younger contemporary of Origen and also a student of Ammonius Saccus, who had tutored Origen. Although the imagery of reunification of the soul with the heavenly bridegroom is also found in Gnosticism, it is unlikely that Origen’s views came from that sect. He argued against their heresies, Crouzel, *Origen*, 13f. For a summary of Gnostic views related to the bridal chamber and the reunification of the soul with the divine, see Batey, *Nuptial*, 70-76.

⁵¹⁸ King, C.J., *Origen on the Song of Songs as the Spirit of Scripture*, Oxford: OUP, 2005, 29.

Bridegroom Himself was to sing as his marriage-hymn, when about to take his Bride... As the perfect Bride of the perfect Husband, then, she has received the words of perfect doctrine.’⁵¹⁹

This perfect doctrine, the ‘kiss’ of God (Song 1:2), was not an affective experience, according to Origen, but insight into the Bridegroom. While the primary themes of his allegorical interpretation are the superlative nature of Christ as the Bridegroom of the Church, and the soul’s union with him, we also find throughout his interpretation the subthemes of salvation history and the journey of Jews and pagans into the knowledge of Christ.⁵²⁰ Origen mentions that he dialogued with rabbis to gain understanding, but without elaborating about this.⁵²¹ Kimelman suggests that cross-pollination occurred between Origen and rabbis in Caesarea where Origen wrote the last five volumes of his ten-volume commentary.⁵²² He stresses that ‘underlying the Jewish and Christian polemic was the claim of each part to be able to explicate the Song in terms of its own position.’⁵²³

However, Origen was concerned with the ultimate reunion of the soul with the Logos, a mystical reality. Crouzel stresses that Origen was a mystic even though he exalted the intellect; his writings indicate that he must have written from experience, and experienced what he understood.⁵²⁴ Gilson calls it ‘the mysticism of an exegete’.⁵²⁵

Origen approached the book of Song of Songs ‘as the summit of the mystical life’.⁵²⁶ For him, it portrayed union with God, the return of the soul to the Logos, the ultimate Bridegroom.

He had sought to discover the hidden meaning of the Song, by sublimating the natural reading for the higher, spiritual reading. Subsequent exegetes would take Origen’s lead of applying the *vehicle* of the Song to its Christological *tenor*, as the *primary* interpretation of the Song; it became re-literalized as the relationship of Christ and the individual soul.⁵²⁷

⁵¹⁹ Origen, *Song*, 46f, *Prologue* 4.

⁵²⁰ Clark, *Ascetic*, 410.

⁵²¹ *Ibid.*, 401.

⁵²² Kimelman, R., ‘Rabbi Yohanan and Origen on the Song of Songs: A Third-Century Jewish-Christian Disputation’, *HTR* 73/3-4 (1980), 567-595, citing 573.

⁵²³ *Ibid.*, 574. However, only Origen interprets the Song as a drama; the rabbis use it symbolically.

⁵²⁴ Crouzel, *Origen*, 119.

⁵²⁵ Gilson, E., *The Mystical Theology of Saint Bernard*, Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1990, 216.

⁵²⁶ King, *Origen*, 36.

⁵²⁷ Astell, *Song*, 8.

Middle Ages

The metaphor of the ‘celibate Bridegroom’ perpetrated through the Middle Ages. But it was no longer a metaphor; Jesus became understood as the Lover in the Song of Songs. This interpretation gave rise to a myriad mystical writings, both personal journals as well as commentaries. From the 5th through the 12th centuries, over a hundred commentaries on the Song of Songs were written—it was the most commented upon book.⁵²⁸ Astell observes the sheer number of expositions of the Song of Songs attests to the general *affectus* of the medieval psyche and their fascination with the Song.⁵²⁹ Additionally, many copies of Origen’s commentary are existent from that period, although only the first section of the Latin translation was available to the medieval exegetes. Origen, although censured as a heretic by this time, was, nevertheless, a ‘shadow influence’ on Bernard of Clairvaux and other exegetes of the Song in the Middle Ages.⁵³⁰

Astell points out that the medieval expositors on the Song sought to ‘apply the interpreted text to the concrete life situation of their auditors and use the affective force of the Song’s literal imagery to move them to virtuous action.’⁵³¹ Their purpose is the application of this truth. Rather than suppress *eros*, the medieval expositors drew upon the powerful imagery in the song to stir up *affectus* for Christ and motivate the audience to a deeper love of God, and thus, compel them to do good works.

Whereas Origen sought to discover the true meaning of the text, by the time of the Middle Ages, the Song was understood as the description of the divine Bridegroom and his Bride, the individual soul. Song of Songs became *the* method of mystically encountering the divine Bridegroom.

Bernard of Clairvaux In 1135, Bernard began his expositions of Song of Songs, and by the time of his death in 1158, he had written 86 sermons on the Song. His sermons cover only Song 1:1-3:5; his exposition extends only a few verses beyond the existent

⁵²⁸ E.A. Matter, *The Voice of My Beloved*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990, 3. Most interpretations follow Origen’s casting of the Lover and Beloved as Christ and the Church or individual soul, but others portray the Beloved as Mary. See Astell, *Song*, 42-72.

⁵²⁹ Astell, *Song*, 9.

⁵³⁰ Matter, *Voice*, 39f.

⁵³¹ Astell, *Song*, 8.

Latin versions of Origen's commentaries.⁵³² The sermons are a series of teachings of Christology and doctrine drawn from his expositions of the Song of Songs.⁵³³

Bernard argues that the 'sacred and sublime teaching' of the Song is for those who are pure in heart. It is only 'for the ears and hearts of those who have been disciplined and been made wise.'⁵³⁴ He emphasizes some souls need to know Jesus as the Great Physician first.⁵³⁵ According to Bernard, the Lord reveals himself to a soul 'in the way that He sees as best', not in his fullness, for on this side, we will only see him in part.⁵³⁶

Bernard maintained that the Church corporately is the Bride of Christ, the incarnate Word, while the individual soul is the Bride of the eternal Word, not of Christ incarnate. Fassetta argues that Bernard makes this distinction to avoid confusion with the humanity of Christ, because 'God is not a human partner.'⁵³⁷

To affirm that the Bridegroom of the soul is the Word, and not Christ, maintains greater respect for the divine transcendence, the distance between God and humanity, because the Word is not gendered whereas Christ is, from which fact derives the risk of confusion on the psychological plane.⁵³⁸

The sufferings of Christ feature prominently in Bernard's understanding of Jesus as the Bridegroom. In Sermon 43, he speaks of the suffering of Christ as the 'myrrh' that he carries always between his breasts (cf. Song 1:13).⁵³⁹ He elaborates that the sufferings of Christ are not limited to his Passion, but include the humility of the Word becoming flesh, living the privations of a baby, later being scorned, ridiculed and persecuted in his ministry, which culminated in his death on the cross and being

⁵³² The Latin remnant of Origen's commentary covered Song 1:1-3:1. B. Stefaniw comments that eight copies of Origen's work were found in Bernard's library at Clairvaux, 'Spiritual Friendship and Bridal Mysticism in an Age of Affectivity', *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 41/1 (2006), 65-78, citing 72.

⁵³³ LeClerq, J., 'Introduction to Saint Bernard's Doctrine in the Sermons on the Song of Songs', *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 43/3 (2008), 309-325, citing 312.

⁵³⁴ 'If the flesh has not been mastered by discipline and subjected to the Spirit, unless the burden of the glamour of the world has been despised and thrown away the heart remains impure and is not worthy to pursue the Sacred Song,' Bernard of Clairvaux, *The Song of Songs*, H. Backhouse (ed.), London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1990, 30, Sermon 1. His thought echoes Origen's warnings to readers of the spiritual Song.

⁵³⁵ Bernard observes that some are not able to accept the 'sacred' meaning of the Song; rather, there are those who need to know Jesus as the Healer and Physician. He refers to Jesus' comment in the story that precedes the Bridegroom parable in Matt 9:12; Mark 2:17; Luke 5:31, Bernard, *Song*, 85f, Sermon 32.

⁵³⁶ Bernard, *Song*, 74, Sermon 31.

⁵³⁷ R. Fassetta, 'The Christocentric and Nuptial Mysticism of Saint Bernard in the Sermons on the Song of Songs', *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 49/3 (2014), 347-365, citing 357.

⁵³⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵³⁹ Bernard, *Song*, 110, Sermon 43.

forsaken by the Father. The fellowship of Christ's sufferings tempered all the affective interpretations of Song.

In addition, Bernard emphasized the beauty of Christ, and the necessity to meditate on his beauty. Only beauty can awaken desire. Like his broad perception of Christ's sufferings, Bernard did not limit the beauty of the Christ to his transcendent form. Instead, we read in Sermon 45 of Bernard's view of the beauty of Christ in contemplating his glorious eternal state as the Morning Star and the stark beauty of his emptying himself of this glory and taking on human form.⁵⁴⁰

Bernard emphasizes the difference between a mere knowledge of the Song's spiritual meaning, and the experiential knowledge of Jesus as the Bridegroom and Lover. Moreover, he argues for the necessity to love God above all else: 'So you must love the Lord your God wholeheartedly, singlemindedly and sacrificially.'⁵⁴¹

Fassetta articulates the analogy between human marriage and spiritual marriage. As with human marriage, our divine Spouse polarizes our energies, serves as a guidepost, and forms the object of our desires and cares. We are to have a 'preferential love' for Christ, a love above all others.⁵⁴²

Bernard's sermons and affective understanding of Christ influenced subsequent generations, Catholic and Protestant.

Bridal Mysticism Bridal mysticism, then, became 'a genre of mystical expression which draws its language largely from the Song of Songs...[with] a focus on Christ as Lover, both of the soul and, more frequently, of the visionary herself.'⁵⁴³ During the medieval period, women mystics, such as Mechtild of Hackeborn and Mechthild of Magdeburg, wrote of their spiritual experiences in sensuous detail, relaying their visions and religious experiences using nuptial imagery.⁵⁴⁴ Courtly love also influenced their expressions.⁵⁴⁵ However, it was not only a rhapsodizing of their religious experiences; as with Bernard, the element of suffering featured strongly. For

⁵⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 113f, Sermon 45.

⁵⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 58, Sermon 20.

⁵⁴² Fassetta, 'Christocentric', 357.

⁵⁴³ R. Voaden, 'Mechtild of Hackeborn', in A. Minnis and R. Voaden (eds.), *Medieval Holy Women in the Christian Tradition c. 1100 – c.1500*, Turnhout: Brepols, 2010, 431-452, citing 438n36.

⁵⁴⁴ *Ibid.*; A. Hollywood and P.Z. Beckman, 'Mechthild of Magdeburg', in A. Minnis and R. Voaden (eds.), *Medieval Holy Women in the Christian Tradition c. 1100 – c.1500*, Turnhout: Brepols, 2010, 411-430.

⁵⁴⁵ Voaden, 'Mechtild', 436.

these mystics, spiritual marriage included knowing him in his humanity and the fellowship of his sufferings.⁵⁴⁶

Dreyer underscores that it was the very love of Christ expressed through the cross that ‘swept them up into the intimacy and ecstasy of spousal relationship’.⁵⁴⁷ She emphasizes how the mystics viewed their own suffering in light of the suffering of their Beloved, Jesus Christ. The cross very poignantly expresses ‘the choice to love deeply and the suffering that inevitably comes in its wake’.⁵⁴⁸ By understanding the ‘suffering love of Jesus of Nazareth’, the mystics understood that ‘The cost of true love and genuine discipleship is high.’⁵⁴⁹

John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila During a time of imprisonment and severe persecution from his fellow monks in the Carmelite order, John of the Cross composed an exquisite love ballad based on the Song of Songs.⁵⁵⁰ He entitled it, *The Spiritual Canticle*. It is his personalized expression of love for the divine Bridegroom.

This love poem inspired many interpretations, and as a result John of the Cross penned his own lengthy commentary on his song.⁵⁵¹ He describes the stages of a soul in its journey to complete union with God, the spiritual marriage.

A contemporary Carmelite, Teresa of Avila, was compelled by her confessors to write explanations of her mystical experiences. In her *Interior Castle*, completed only months before her death, she describes the stages a person or ‘soul’ progresses to attain full spiritual marriage, union of the soul with God. She metaphorically describes the soul as an extraordinarily beautiful castle with many rooms.⁵⁵² It is so beautiful because it is the dwelling place of God. When the distractions and battles incurred in the outer rooms have been overcome, the soul enters into the most private room of the interior castle, into union with God. She describes the final stage as one of ‘true peace’ in the continual abiding presence of God, an awareness of ‘the divine company’ of the

⁵⁴⁶ E.A. Dreyer, ‘Jesus as Bridegroom and Lover: A Critical Retrieval of a Medieval Metaphor’, in J. Cavadini and L. Holt (eds.), *Who Do You Say That I Am?*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2004, 207-234, citing 217. She also emphasizes the Trinitarian nature of spiritual marriage reflected in mystic literature.

⁵⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 226.

⁵⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 223.

⁵⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵⁰ John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle & Poems*, Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1978, 1.

⁵⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵⁵² Teresa of Avila, ‘Interior Castle’ in *The Collected Works of Teresa of Avila*, Washington DC: ICS Publications, 1980, 2:283; I:1.1.

Trinity within.⁵⁵³ It is not an ongoing rapturous experience, but a deep quiet of the soul; there are no times of spiritual dryness.⁵⁵⁴

Teresa saw the outworking of virtue as the proof of any true spiritual experience.⁵⁵⁵ The encounter with the divine Bridegroom should bear witness in a person's life. 'Perhaps Teresa's greatest contribution as a teacher of the spiritual life is to show us that the path of progress in prayer is essentially ordinary...It is simply a case of the natural growth of what God intends for us all.'⁵⁵⁶

Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross were reformers in the Discalced Carmelite order. Their extreme piety and ascetic practices were met by criticism of many, but the fruit of their ministry and writings impacted future generations. Their writings are still influential today.

The Bridegroom Metaphor in Protestant Spirituality

Through the Reformation, the nuptial mysticism carried over into the different streams of Protestantism, and the metaphor of Jesus the Bridegroom took on colourful expressions. Song of Songs remained the prominent lens through which the metaphor was understood.

Luther incorporated nuptial imagery throughout his ministry to express the reality of union with Christ.⁵⁵⁷ The Puritans and Non-Conformists preached and published tracts proclaiming the passion of the Bridegroom Jesus for his Bride.⁵⁵⁸ In the 17th century, Protestant women published their spiritual journals, rhapsodizing their love with their spiritual Bridegroom, utilizing the Song of Songs as a model.⁵⁵⁹ This genre continued through the next centuries.

Guyon's commentary on Song of Songs landed her in prison.⁵⁶⁰ Her allegory described her pilgrimage into spiritual marriage, although it was her controversial interpretation of union with God and her teaching on communion with God in prayer

⁵⁵³ *Ibid.*, 2:430; VII:1.7.

⁵⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 2:440f; VII:3.8, 10.

⁵⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 2:351; V:3.8; cf. Dreyer, 'Jesus', 214.

⁵⁵⁶ M.M. Clare, *Carmelite Ascent*, Oxford: SLG, 2012, 13f.

⁵⁵⁷ B.R. Hoffman, *Luther and the Mystics*, Minneapolis: Ausburg, 1976, 149-50, 155-60, 174.

⁵⁵⁸ E. Clarke, *Politics, Religion and the Song of Songs in Seventeenth-Century England*, Houndmills: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011; E. Clarke, 'Glorious Lover: Baptist Literature of the 1680s and the Bride of Christ', *Baptist Quarterly* 43/8 (2010), 452-472; M.P. Winship, 'Behold He Cometh! Marital Imagery in Massachusetts Preaching, 1630-1730', *Early American Literature* 27/3 (1992), 170-184.

⁵⁵⁹ Clarke, *Politics*, 151-157. She cites examples of women writers who used the 'extravagant language' in the Song of Songs, even elaborating on it, to express their rapturous encounters with Christ, 157.

⁵⁶⁰ J. Guyon, *Song of the Bride*, New Kensington: Whitaker, 1997, 8.

that provoked her persecution.⁵⁶¹ Zinzendorf's theology of the heart 'stressed personal religious experience', which included his own peculiar interpretation of spiritual marriage.⁵⁶² The burgeoning Moravian missions movement carried this brand of bridal mysticism to many nations.⁵⁶³ The Holiness Movement adapted Guyon's concept of spiritual marriage into their own rhetoric.⁵⁶⁴ The early Pentecostals employed nuptial imagery to associate the baptism of the Holy Spirit with spiritual marriage.⁵⁶⁵ And the kaleidoscope of interpretations of Jesus the Bridegroom continues to the present day.

Conclusion

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to review the numerous expressions and interpretations of this metaphor throughout Church history or even in the Protestant Church. We will have to leave that for a future work. However, we have provided a few of the formative examples whose revelation of Jesus the Bridegroom has continued to inform Christian spirituality.

We have seen that Song of Songs overshadowed the New Covenant model. The Bridegroom metaphor was amalgamated with the Song. The Song became literalized into the worship of the second person of the Trinity, although union with God, for some of the mystics, was a Trinitarian experience. Spiritual marriage, by and large, described a mystical experience of union with the divine, and often limited to those in monasteries. However, the model of marital faithfulness featured prominently in understanding of the metaphor.

The Bride of Christ metaphor was reassigned from the corporate identity of the people of God to the individual soul, although it always retained a glimmer of the corporate association. The identification of the 'embodied' brides of Christ, the consecrated virgins, detracted from the metaphoric call to utter fidelity in all of God's

⁵⁶¹ P. Ward, 'Madame Guyon (1648-1717)', in C. Lindberg (ed.), *The Pietist Theologians*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2005, 161-174; P. Thompson, *Madame Guyon*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1986, 157-185. Guyon was a devout Catholic, but her writings had a profound and widespread influence the spirituality of Protestants in Europe and North America.

⁵⁶² C.D. Atwood, 'Sleeping in the Arms of Christ: Sanctifying Sexuality in the Eighteenth-Century Moravian Church', *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 8/1 (1997), 25-51, citing 25.

⁵⁶³ P. Vogt, 'Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf (1700-1760)', in C. Lindberg (ed.), *The Pietist Theologians*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2005, 207-223; P.M. Peucker, 'The Songs of the Sifting: Understanding the Role of Bridal Mysticism in Moravian Piety in the late 1740s', *Journal of Moravian History* 3 (2007), 51-87.

⁵⁶⁴ P.A. Ward, 'Madame Guyon and Experiential Theology in America', *CH* 67/3 (1998), 484-498.

⁵⁶⁵ D.M. Coulter, 'The Spirit and the Bride Revisited: Pentecostalism, Renewal, and the Sense of History', *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 21 (2012), 298-319, citing 310.

people. The additional models of Song of Songs, along with the New Testament teaching on marriage further reshaped the metaphor of Jesus the Bridegroom.

The Lover in the Song of Songs became known as Jesus the Bridegroom.

CONCLUSION

In our study we have uncovered the New Testament metaphor of Jesus the Bridegroom by examining the models of the promised New Covenant in betrothal terms, patriarchal marriage, and wedding customs. The metaphor, in its New Testament context, retains strong associations with the Old Testament Prophets. Yet the question remains, how did we arrive at the contemporary understanding of Jesus the Bridegroom? The concept of ‘Jesus is my Boyfriend’ seems like a quantum leap from the New Testament understanding of the Bridegroom.

As we have seen, the models that have shaped the metaphor of Jesus the Bridegroom have shifted throughout its reception history. The current perceptions of Jesus the Bridegroom stem from the contemporary models of a bridegroom and popular allegorical interpretations of Song of Songs. The Eldredges and those with similar conceptions, have changed the biblical models of the metaphor of Jesus the Bridegroom, and associated him with the romantic fictional heroes of popular culture. The models of patriarchal marriage and covenant that were at least partly understood through the previous 1900 years of the Church, have been largely discarded. Bickle and others who understand Jesus the Bridegroom through the lens of Song of Songs use their own allegories to animate the metaphor.

Weems keenly reminds us that we must be vigilant about metaphors because of their power to create new meaning, and influence our perceptions of our relationship with God.⁵⁶⁶ Changing models affect the meaning of the metaphor, as we have seen demonstrated in Church history. The biblical writers relied on their own traditions of marriage to define this metaphor in their times, while the popular notions of a bridegroom have resulted in a boyfriend, lover, fiancé understanding of the second person of the Trinity. This shows how metaphor functions; the changing networks of association create new meaning for the metaphor.

While it is probably impossible to limit the meaning generated from the current networks of association for bridegrooms, it is possible to reintroduce the models of covenant and patriarchal marriage to enhance the understanding of the New Testament

⁵⁶⁶ Weems, *Battered*, 116.

metaphor. However, these models may not be well received in our ‘romantic’, sexualized, ‘whatever is true for you’ Western culture. Moreover, women who have suffered with abusive husbands, for example, may not be able to tolerate a model related to the imagery in the Old Testament Prophets. The networks of association from personal experience frame one’s reception of a metaphor. So while some disassociation with the prophetic models may be intentional or simply ignorance on the part of popular authors, we cannot compromise the New Testament writers’ use of the prophetic models in our understanding of Jesus the Bridegroom.

We, as students of the Bible, must attempt to understand the whole picture. We need to retrieve the New Testament metaphor of Jesus the Bridegroom, the establisher of the New Covenant, along with the networks of association of covenant and patriarchal marriage, in order to rightly know Jesus.

The New Testament writers relied on the model of the prophetic promise of a New Covenant in betrothal terms when they referred to Jesus as the eschatological Bridegroom. The Prophets made explicit the marriage metaphor that was inferred in the Mosaic Covenant. The Covenant contains latent marital language, such as the declaration of ‘You are my people and I am your God.’ Both models of patriarchal marriage and the suzerain covenant evoke associations of absolute fidelity and loyalty on the part of the Wife of Yahweh.

Hosea’s divinely commanded marriage to Gomer displayed Israel’s relation to Yahweh; the people of God had indeed become an adulterous Wife. The jealousy of Yahweh had been provoked. But despite the covenantal curses that befell Israel for the spiritual adultery through the breach of Covenant, Yahweh’s *hesed* and mercy overruled his judgment. He promised restoration and a new betrothal to his people.

Jeremiah’s promise of a New Covenant further develops the promise of Hosea’s new betrothal. Virgin Israel will indeed go out and dance with the joyful (31:4), and once again Israel will be ‘his People’.

The knowledge of God is a central feature of the New Covenant. Jeremiah’s promise of the Law being written on the people’s hearts foreshadows Ezekiel’s promise of a new heart and God placing his Spirit in his people, in order to know him (Ez. 11:17f; 36:25-27; 37:14, 26). Cleansing and forgiveness of sins are additional key elements.

Ezekiel’s use of the marital metaphor is even more vulgar and abusive than Hosea and Jeremiah; he uses this imagery to shock his audience to the horror of their

spiritual adultery. But Ezekiel does not use the positive aspects of metaphor in his oracles of restoration; instead he uses other imagery.

Second Isaiah's use of the metaphor is entirely positive, proclaiming restoration of the marriage and Yahweh's unfailing commitment to his people. In Chapter 54, we find the explicit declaration, 'Your Maker is your Husband.' Other verses express Yahweh's promises of his *hesed* and covenant of peace as he once again has compassion on Zion.

The Song of Songs and Psalm 45 portray very different pictures compared to the prophetic use of the metaphor of marriage and covenantal faithfulness. Allegorical interpretations of these love songs were probably not common in the first century.

The New Testament writers relied on this promised New Covenant in betrothal terms as they made use of the metaphor of Jesus the Bridegroom. The models of patriarchal marriage and wedding customs supplemented the network of associations that informed the biblical authors and early readers of these works. But the egalitarian romance in Song of Songs does not feature in the New Testament.

John uses the model of the new betrothal to amplify the establishment of New Covenant. In the first chapters of his gospel, John sets forth the new order of worship. At the wedding in Cana, Jesus himself takes the responsibility of the bridegroom to provide substantial wine for the guests—the best wine. The New Covenant wine excels that of the old. The Baptist's testimony indicates that Jesus is the Bridegroom and his disciples constitute those who are his Bride. The scene at the well with the Samaritan woman portrays the promised reuniting of Israel and Judah in the new betrothal, as prophesied in Hosea.

The synoptic writers also utilize the prophetic new betrothal imagery to define the New Covenant. They include Jesus' self-reference to the Bridegroom which points to his deity, and the parables describing the newness of his work. Matthew incorporates the concept of the eschatological feast in the wedding parables, indicating that only those who demonstrate fidelity to Jesus will be at the banquet. He also includes two references to 'an adulterous generation', indicating that those who do not believe Jesus are committing spiritual adultery. Mark reinforces the point that total devotion to Jesus is a prerequisite to discipleship; an unashamed witness is necessary in this 'adulterous generation'. The model of covenantal faithfulness surfaces in the authors' usage of this metaphor.

Spiritual adultery is not only a matter of believing in Jesus or not believing in Jesus. Our faith must be demonstrated by our actions. James makes it clear that God is still jealous for his people's undivided devotion. When believers are drawn into 'friendship with the world', they are committing spiritual adultery, even within the New Covenant. Sincere repentance must follow in order to restore the exclusive loyalty to Jesus set forth in the New Testament.

Paul also uses marital imagery to explain covenantal faithfulness. Believers are now temples of the Holy Spirit, belonging to Christ; our spiritual union with Christ is analogous to a 'one-flesh' relationship. He incorporates wedding customs to communicate that the 'pure virgin' Church is in jeopardy of being deceived and committing spiritual adultery before she is presented to her one and only Husband, Jesus. While waiting for this presentation, the Church is to submit to Christ in everything, and to fear him. Yet, Christ loves us and gave himself for us. Through his sacrificial love and atonement, the Church is joined with Christ, and becomes his mystical body. This is the great mystery of Christ and the Church. As temples of the Holy Spirit, we are mystically his body. Therefore, we are to live in a manner worthy of this reality. The Church is his Bride and his body in the present, but the fullness will be experienced in the future.

Revelation gives a glimpse of that future presentation of the Bride to Christ at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. The Bride prepares for that day with the good works that flow from love and fidelity to her Bridegroom. The New Jerusalem, both a city and a people, come down from the New Heaven to the New Earth. Until that time of Jesus the Bridegroom's return, the Spirit and the Bride cry out for him to 'Come', and invite all to join into the wedding feast.

The New Testament writers employed this metaphor to show the arrival of the New Covenant, the love of Christ, and the fidelity that is required in our response. It is also used to describe our spiritual union with Christ, although the body and building metaphors, and the vine and branches (John 15) metaphor are also used to depict this bond. The romantic images from the Song of Songs are not evidenced in the New Testament; rather it is the prophetic model that carries over from the Old Covenant into the New.

However, the Early Church took the metaphor of Jesus the Bridegroom and used it for their own ascetic purposes. Utilizing the models of celibacy and marriage available in the New Testament, this metaphor was displaced by a 'celibate

Bridegroom'. Virgins who chose the single life over marriage were designated as 'brides of Christ'. The corporate understanding of the Bride began to deteriorate as the celibate individual became known and honoured as a 'bride of Christ'.

The allegorical rendering of Song of Songs unduly influenced the future reception of the metaphor. It became the primary network of association. While Origen sought to sublimate the natural meaning for the higher, spiritual meaning, this allegory later became understood as the love song of Christ to his Church, or more often, the individual soul. The medieval mystics took this metaphor to a new level with spiritual marriage being understood of the journey of the soul into full union with Christ. However, the sensual aspects of the metaphor were tempered by embracing Christ's sufferings as a means of fellowship with him. After the Reformation, the understanding of Jesus the Bridegroom took on an even more affective persona through the allegorical renderings of the Song of Songs. These allegories continued to serve as means of expression for believers' devotion to Christ through the centuries. Jesus the Bridegroom became synonymous with the Lover in the Song of Songs.

However, Jesus the Bridegroom, while pointing to the reality of our relationship with God, remains a metaphor. In its New Testament context, it maintains the associations with covenantal faithfulness and patriarchal marriage, not the Lover in the Song of Songs. Through this metaphor, we see a presentation of the New Covenant inaugurated by Jesus Christ.

The New Covenant is about devotion to Jesus Christ, supremely and exclusively. He loves us and gave himself up for us. He cherishes his Bride. When we look at the metaphor in its wider prophetic context, we recognize that Jesus Christ suffered the punishment that his unfaithful Wife should be given, based on ancient adultery laws. Through his death, he atoned for the iniquities of all believers for all time. His love compelled his sacrifice. As we understand this incredible sacrifice we can begin to glimpse the reality of his indescribable love.

And we are to love him in return. This is not only an emotional love, but it is demonstrated through our actions; it requires sacrifice on our part too. We have a privileged position as the 'Bride of Christ' and we are to live in a worthy manner.

Considering patriarchal marriage as a model, we are to look to Jesus for all of our protection, provision, and even identity. We are to be 'crucified with Christ', identified with him in his death and sufferings, so that his Spirit's life lives through us. As an obedient believer, we are to submit to our Husband Christ in everything. We are

to demonstrate our love for him through our obedience. We are wise when we put his teaching into practice and thereby procure enough 'oil' so that we will be able to endure to the end. Without living lives in obedience to his commands, we endanger ourselves to become 'adulteresses' and provoke the Lord to jealousy, which is synonymous with his judgment, wrath, or discipline. At the same time, he loves us and rejoices over us like a bridegroom rejoices over his bride.

The Bridegroom metaphor in the New Testament reinforces the necessity for exclusive allegiance to Christ. Something that is often overlooked in this metaphor is that it is actually a call to discipleship. As the model of covenantal faithfulness is incorporated, there is no room for 'cheap grace'. When we come to Christ, we are to 'take up our cross daily and deny ourselves'. We are to lose our lives for his sake. Christ gave his all; we are to give him our all in return. The motivation is his love. We find true 'self' when we die to the old 'self'.

Union with Christ is a reality for all those who are born of the Spirit, though many believers fail to experience the depth of love, peace, and joy of this reality. We are temples of the Holy Spirit. Renewing our mind to this truth enables us to grow in our experience of this union. While few may actually realise the depths of this union on this side of heaven, it is available for all. Whenever we lay down our self-will, we discover the true life found in Christ Jesus, and he is worth it all.

Many shy away from the Bridegroom metaphor because of its strong associations with the Song of Songs. But Song of Songs is not the substance of the metaphor. When one grasps the call to discipleship that is the essence of this metaphor, the sensual overtones diminish and the importance of complete devotion to Jesus moves to the forefront. He is the pearl of great price. Obedience is a joyful thing, when understood and offered as love. Being crucified with Christ is a gift, when we know the corollary, 'who loved me and gave himself for me'.

The metaphor of Jesus the Bridegroom is a multifaceted diamond. Each model contributes to the radiance of knowing Jesus. In the Church today, the diamond is not seen in its full lustre because it has lost the crucial models of the New Testament authors, namely, covenant and patriarchal marriage. However, it is difficult to understand the meaning of covenant today when all that we have that resembles it is

the ‘fragile institution of marriage’.⁵⁶⁷ Furthermore, marriage in the Western culture, by and large, is not reflective of the patriarchal marriage of biblical times.

Instead of a beautiful gem, the metaphor becomes flat like glass or worse, as a mirror that only reflects our culture or personal expectations of a bridegroom. In order to appreciate the magnificence of Jesus the Bridegroom, we have to return to the original biblical context. We have seen how the Church’s view of Jesus the Bridegroom reflects the culture in which we live. The concept of discipleship has been superseded by a romantic encounter with Jesus. This idea is repugnant for many believers and as a result, caused the removal of the metaphor from their perception of Jesus. Song of Songs, with its varied allegorical interpretations can contribute to the misunderstanding of Jesus the Bridegroom. For some, the Song can be a beautiful expression in their devotion to Christ. For others, it is a stumbling block. Bernard of Clairvaux eloquently expressed that some believers need a physician and not a passionate bridegroom as displayed in Song of Songs.⁵⁶⁸ This sensual, romantic interpretation of Jesus is not required in order to appreciate the bridal metaphor. Song of Songs was not a model utilized by the New Testament writers. However, without an understanding of covenant and patriarchal marriage, Jesus the Bridegroom is impossible to comprehend.

While we have studied this metaphor, it has become apparent that knowing Jesus the Bridegroom precipitates a systemic change. He is not our ‘date’ but the Almighty Son of God, the second person of the Trinity. He loves us completely, and has given himself for us. Such love demands our souls, our lives, our all.

While we have had to limit the scope of this thesis, there are ample opportunities for further studies. More explorations into the variety of models of this metaphor throughout reception history would provide a fascinating study. A further investigation of the contemporary interpretations of Jesus the Bridegroom and his Bride would provide insight into the Church’s popular understanding of this metaphor, and give additional means to correct the imbalance exhibited by some. A study of Paul’s ‘one flesh’ imagery and how it relates to his concept of union with Christ, in comparison with other New Testament writers metaphors of this union, would provide greater understanding of our bond with Christ. Finally, a further understanding of the

⁵⁶⁷ Mendenhall and Herion, ‘Covenant’, 1:1179.

⁵⁶⁸ Bernard, *Song*, 85f, Sermon 32.

bridal metaphor as it relates to discipleship in the New Covenant context would illumine this metaphor in a fresh new way.

The New Testament writers used a variety of metaphors to explain the New Covenant relationship with Jesus Christ. The nuptial and marital metaphors are just one way of explaining the New Covenant and our union with Christ. The Bible is resplendent with metaphors, because no one is adequate to explain who God is or how we relate to him. When any metaphor is exalted to the point of framing our worldview, we risk the danger of skewing our understanding of what it means to be in relationship with God.

We advocate lifting the frame of Song of Songs from the metaphor of Jesus the Bridegroom and his Bride, even for a moment, to understand the depth of this imagery. When we remove this association, we see that Jesus the Bridegroom is a metaphor of discipleship in the New Covenant context. This metaphor evokes more than an affective worship or an emotional adoration. It is a call to follow Christ unashamedly, to lose our lives for his sake, in response the indescribable love and forgiveness that are bestowed upon us in Christ. It is the right response to such an overwhelming love.

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